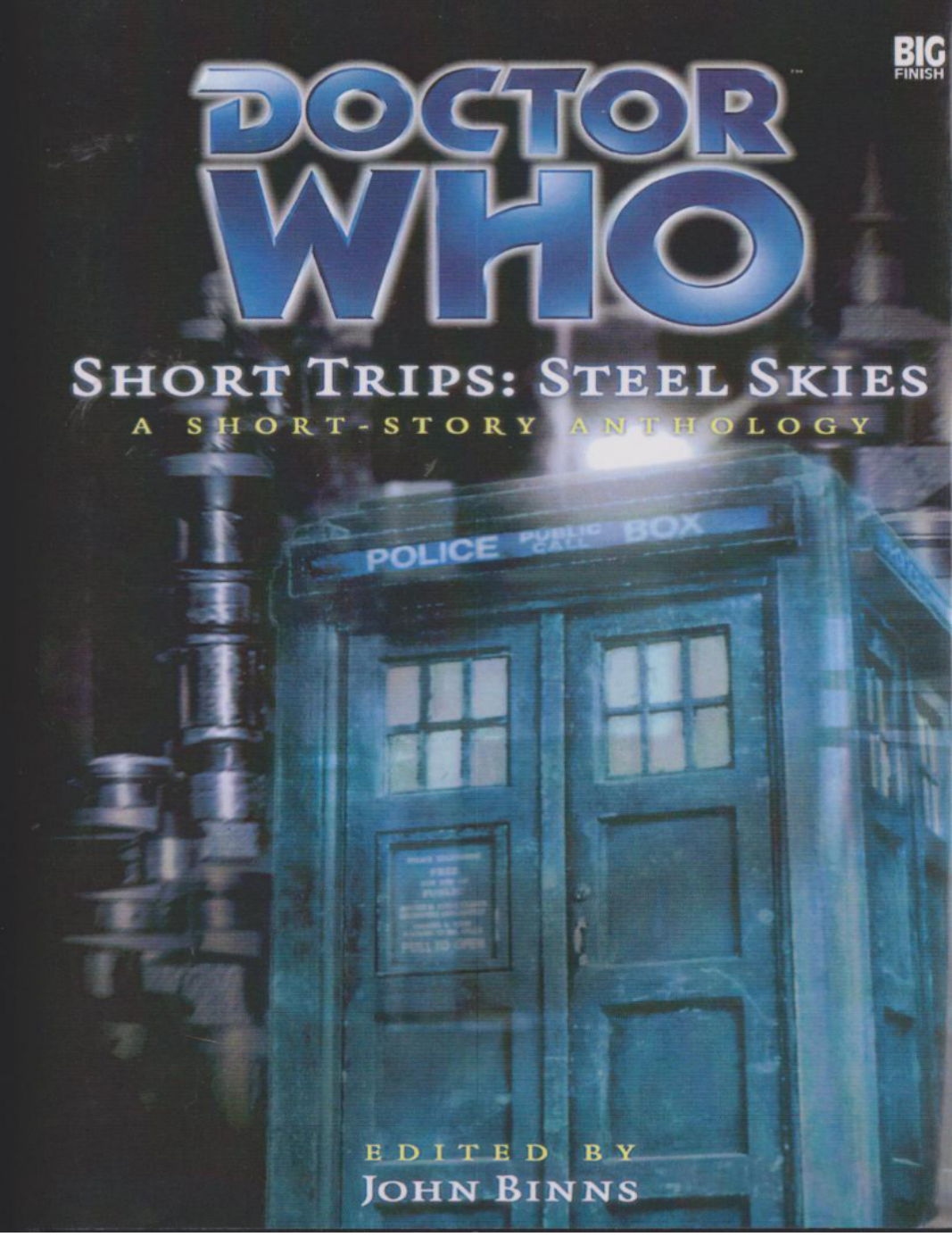
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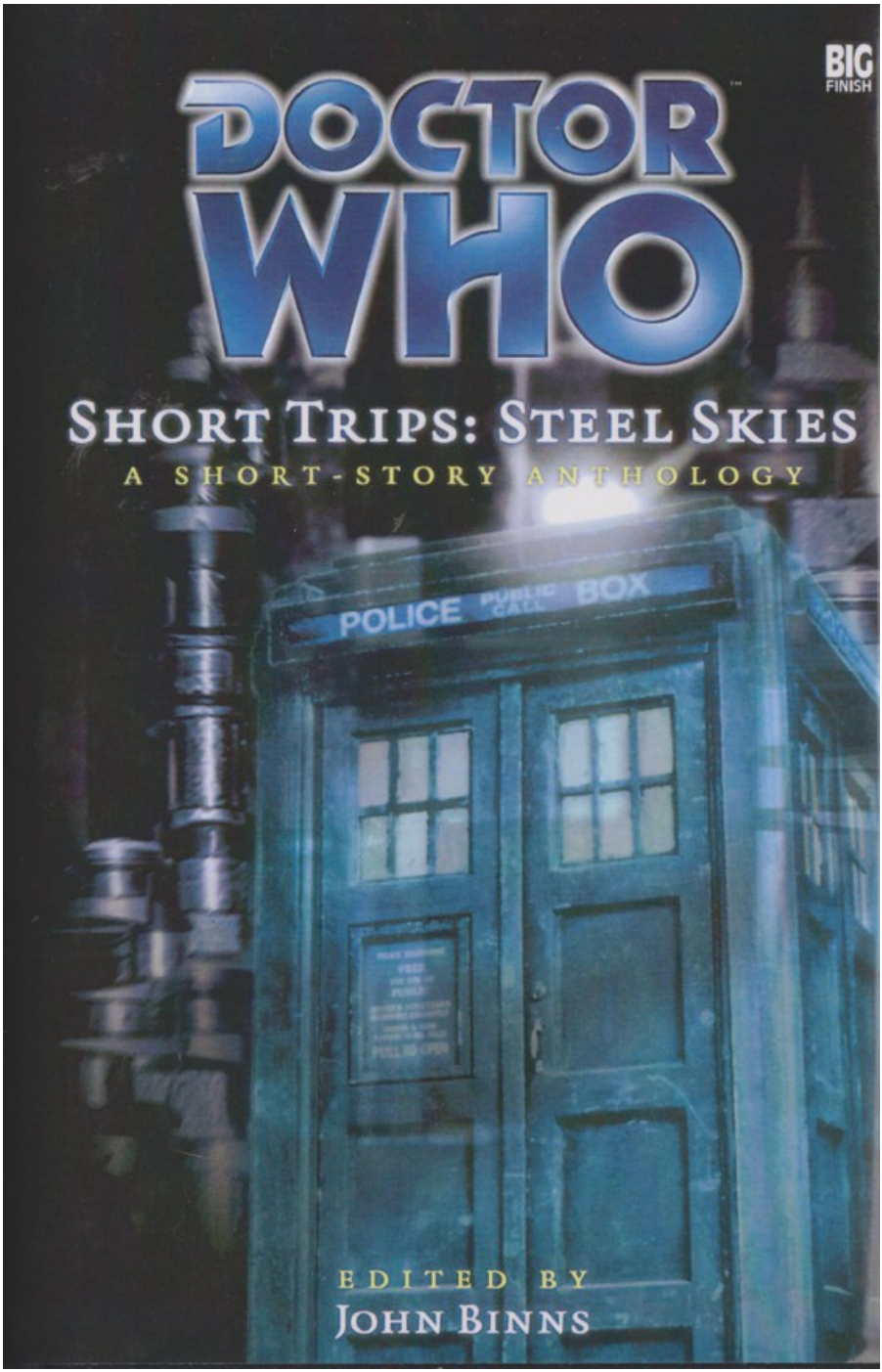
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SECTION 01

FLIGHT

Corridors of Power

Matthew Griffiths

'We've landed inside another spaceship; remarked Steven. He stood by **the** console, looking up at the dim image on the scanner. Although it was **too** light inside the Ship to see anything on the screen in detail, he could Just about make out a smooth curve into the distance that looked like a **tunnel,** opening from a circular bulkhead close to the TARDIS. He turned **to** the others.

The Doctor leaned forward in his chair, steepling his fingers as he too **peered** at the scanner screen. 'Mmm. It does seem to be some kind of **vessel,** my boy:

Vicki sighed. 'Well, I don't know how you two can be certain about anything. It's far too dark out there:

'Too dark?' Steven began, Ì - '

Something on the scanner caught his eye, a brief burst of light in the **distance.** The shadows were more irregular now, the walls jagged, but in **the** moment's illumination, Steven was sure they had landed inside **Another craft. He looked at Vicki.** 'Well, you saw that, didn't you? That's definitely a corridor out there:

Vicki returned his gaze. 'Well then, clever clogs, if that's a corridor, **where's** the floor?'

Steven frowned. Nothing was very clear out there, admittedly, but there **had** to be a floor. The Doctor began chuckling to himself.

'And what is so funny?'

'The, oh, child is right; the Doctor exhaled. 'Did it not strike you as **Rather odd** that your light picks out the corridor, and yet there is no indication of a floor?' Steven watched as a small, proud expression

formed **on 'Vicki's face.**

He gestured over his shoulder at the picture on the scanner. Ìf there's no floor out there, then what have we landed on?'

The Doctor was about to respond when Vicki hissed, 'Listen!' They could all hear a distant, keening sound from outside. "There's something **out** there!' Vicki cried.

Steven squinted at the image on the screen. Were those shadows Moving?

There was a shuffling sound now, quite close, as though something **were** pushing against the outside of the TARDIS. Then there was silence.

Steven looked at the others. 'Whatever that was, it had to have a floor to walk on. I'm going to look around.'

3

`Patience, patience, my boy!' The Doctor took his cane and pushed himself to his feet, then pottered around the console, looking at several of the panels. 'Minna, yes. Well, it's a trifle dry, but perfectly breathable; he announced, ignoring Steven's attempts to hurry him. He pointed at Vicki.

`There are a couple of torches in the trunk, my dear' - he waved a hand towards the item in question - If you could you fetch them for me? We do not yet know for certain what sources of illumination are out there.'

Steven glared at the Doctor, taking one of the torches that Vicki proffered. Pointedly, he threw the lever that opened the door and marched from the TARDIS. The Doctor and Vicki glanced at one another.

`Come along, my dear; the Doctor chuckled, and ushered her outside.

Steven stood in the doorway of the TARDIS. He couldn't see a thing: perhaps the darkness *bad* been deceptive. He flicked on the torch.

In its beam, he made out a curved wall, rising over and around the TARDIS. The Ship had materialised inside a hollow sphere - which meant the floor, too, must be curved. Sure enough, as he shone his torch around the base of the Ship, he could see that its four corners

were resting on the metallic bowl made by the inside of the curve. He stepped down carefully.

It was a drop of about a foot and a half, he guessed.

The Doctor and Vicki emerged from the TARDIS, looking down at him.

The Doctor was holding the other torch, and he fumbled it on. He sniffed the air.

Steven beamed up at him. 'Well, here's the floor!' he announced. He helped Vicki hop down, but the Doctor waved off his help.

Ì can manage by myself, young man!' he spluttered. He lowered his cane, which found a purchase, and then he gingerly descended from the doorway. He held out the hand with the torch to steady himself, and Steven saw the quick light catch a deep, circular darkness stretching away in front of them. The Doctor took a couple of experimental steps, and Vicki moved to help him.

Steven shone his torch around the TARDIS. He could see that they had landed in a join between two sections of corridor, which led away to the left and right. These tunnels had circular cross-sections, but were narrower than the spherical junction the TARDIS now obstructed.

Ì told you we were in a corridor; Steven smiled. There was no answer.

He looked round.

The Doctor had stooped to examine the surface of the corridor itself, and Vicki was kneeling beside him. Steven joined them.

`What do you make of this, mmm?' the Doctor asked.

Ìt looks like a bed of nails,' said Vicki. Steven looked more closely. The entire interior of the corridor was made **up** of fine, closely packed metallic rods, forming an even surface all the way along.

`Mmm?' prompted the Doctor. Steven looked at him.

I... I don't know.'

They look very much to me like cilia in a digestive tract' The Doctor tapped his lip. `We could be inside an enormous metal stomach. Just

think on that!' he giggled.

Ànd I suppose those sounds we heard were giant enzymes? Don't be silly: scowled Steven, 'it must be some sort of vessel' He put his hand against the smooth panelling inside the junction section, as if to reassure himself.

Vicki shivered. 'But how could anyone live in here?' She clambered into the corridor she and the Doctor had been examining. She had to crouch, and trod carefully onto the floor made up by the rod-tips.'You see? It's not very comfortable'

`Maybe these are just maintenance tunnels,' Steven said, squeezing into the corridor beside her.

'Or perhaps they were not designed to be used by humans,' mused the Doctor.

Light suddenly appeared at the end of the corridor, a burst of sparks that lasted for several seconds. A dry, metallic smell crept towards them.

`What was that?'Vicki hissed. Steven shuffled deeper into the tunnel.

'I'm going to take a look?

`Do be careful, young man!'

Steven turned in the cramped space and stared at the Doctor.'We're not going to get any answers standing around here, are we?' He began to make his way along the tunnel. 'I want to get to the bottom of this'

They made their way into the darkness, the three of them stooped and edging forwards carefully Steven took the lead, his torch picking out the curve of the tunnel ahead of them, the continuous floor of stiff metal filaments. Despite the slenderness of the rods, they offered enough support. Steven was beginning to recognise the design. It was familiar, he thought, in a distant sort of way - something he had seen in the spacedocks before leaving Earth, perhaps?

`Hold on, er, Steven!' the Doctor wheezed. Steven turned, shining his torch back down the tunnel. The Doctor was hunched awkwardly, examining the arc of the corridor as it became a ceiling. 'Well, well; he muttered.

`What is it?' Vicki asked. Steven shuffled back along the corridor

towards them, and both men trained their torches on the spot the Doctor was looking at.There was an uneven, roughly circular break in the surface of the rods, revealing a densely wired panel. The circle was marked round the edges with scorches.

Ìt's part of a plasma-generation circuit, isn't it?'

5

`Quite right, my boy, quite right'

`Why would you want to generate plasma inside a spaceship?' Steven pondered.

Vicki shrugged. 'Central heating?'

The Doctor shone his torch at Steven, who winced in its glare.

And why are you still so sure this is a spaceship?' the Doctor snapped.

There was a low, keening sound from around a bend in the corridor ahead of them.

`There it is again!' Steven spun as quickly as he could manage in the confines of the corridor, and loped further into the darkness, his light bobbing in front of him:Come on!' he called.

The others were still some way behind him when Steven reached the junction and saw the creatures.They gave themselves away as silhouettes in the brief dazzle of sparks from the tool they were using. Before Steven could pin them in his beam, they dropped from sight. There was a clatter of metal, a series of hoots, and then silence. Baffled, Steven twitched the torch around, the light flitting across the darkness.

Vicki scurried up the tunnel behind him, trying to keep her balance on the awkward floor as she came to a halt.

`Did you see them?' breathed Steven.

`See who?'

`There were two of them... hunched... they were welding the wall panels just here' Steven swung the torch round to show her.

The Doctor arrived behind them. Òh dear me, no. I don't think they can have been welding; he sniffed. Steven looked again.

The creatures had been working on a flat wall panel, but in the centre, not on its edges. All he could see was a series of scorch marks beneath a monitor.

The monitor lit up as the Doctor waved his hand in front of it. A blocky white shape appeared on the screen, and was replaced by another, then another, then another.They broke the darkness of the tunnel with a chilly ring of light.

Steven looked at the Doctor. In the slow, strobing illumination,Vicki was nowhere to be seen.

`Vicki?' Steven called.

Ì wanted to see where they went; came her voice.

`Without a torch?' Steven shifted round. He could see Vicki standing next to the shadow floor of the junction piece. `Be careful!'

Ì am being - ' Vicki dropped out of the beam of his torch.There was a shriek, followed by clanging sounds that became ever more distant.

Steven stopped himself short of the shadow, and the Doctor came up close beside him, bringing the torch to bear. They could now see that part 6

of the floor was missing, as though a section had been removed or was yet to be fitted.

Steven dropped to his knees and ran his hand around the inside of the exposed section: it was smooth, without any of the rod-like structures that covered the interior of the corridor, and curved away beneath them.

Ì'm going after her.' Before the Doctor could protest, Steven had lowered himself into the cavity, and began sliding down the curve of the metal.The chute was wide, but with a low roof, and Steven found himself unable to roll into his descent as it became steeper. As he picked up speed, the torch was knocked from his hand and spun into the dark ahead of him, banging against the metallic surface, casting its beam quite at random before it vanished. Soon, Steven was in darkness once more.

Alone in the corridor, the Doctor shone his torch down the hole, tutting to himself. Steven had disappeared as quickly as young Vicki.

The Doctor cast the torchlight around the rim, then back along the corridor. The monitor screen was still flashing its sequence of symbols.

Ì wonder...'

Steven continued to speed down the chute, banging his hands and feet as be went. Was that light he had seen ahead of him as he fell? It bounced in and out of view, but it couldn't have been his torch - surely that had been broken. His head was spinning. Perhaps he had banged it on the metal plating.

The chute abruptly disappeared from underneath him, and he fell into darkness. Then, there *was* a burst of light, before he hit something hard and flat and wide. He lay on his back for a moment, sore and exhausted.

• A *face* moved in front of him.

`Steven?'

He blacked out.

The Doctor had propped the torch on the bulkhead so he could see the edges of the hole clearly, and was perching on the smooth, surrounding section of floor. He had spent quite some time looking at the sequence of symbols. Was it a code of some kind? Part of the plasma-generation unit?

He dabbed his forehead with a handkerchief.

There was a small fizzing noise, and the bulb in his torch expired.

`Dear oh dear! Such shoddy devices.' He picked up the torch, squinted at it in the near-darkness, then shook it gently. 'An inefficient design.

Human, no doubt!' He sighed, sitting back in the light from the screen's cycle of symbols.

The light had a definite edge to it, the Doctor thought. But now, looking over it again, he could see there was actually a distinct line there, down 7

the wall's surface. A join between two panels. He fumbled in his

pocket and produced a box of matches. Striking one, he made his way carefully over to the wall in its flickering light. It was a door!

He waved his cane across the metal surface.There was a brief, low metal mumble, and the door slid, slowly and stiffly, to the left. The Doctor probed the space beyond with the shuddering light from his match.

Ìntriguing. Most intriguing,' he breathed. He levered himself through the door and into the darkness.

Steven almost banged his head when he sat up. Vicki placed her hand on his shoulders as he opened his eyes. He was inches from a curved, metal ceiling.

Òh no, he winced. 'We can't have fallen so far and still be inside that thing'

`Well; Vicki declared, 'we didn't. Look' She gestured upwards with her hand, and Steven could just make out that she was holding the torch he had dropped.

`Switch it on, then, so I can have a proper look,' he said.

Ìt's broken'

Steven sighed, and let his eyes adjust to the surroundings. It was brighter here, though not much, and the ceiling curved slowly up and further away from them. Vicki shook her head, smiling at him and completing his thought.

Ìt's not the ceiling, silly That's the spaceship!'

`But we are still inside - something. What - ?' he paused. He could hear shuffling sounds, and then, gradually, the noise of machinery. There were shapes moving across the floor around them. 'It's them! What are they doing?'

`They're working on the ship!'Vicki spoke as if it was obvious.

Three of the shapes gathered closer around them. At first, Steven saw them as three black blots against the light, but soon he could make out their features. Like the creatures he had seen earlier, they looked as though they were doubled up, squat on two pairs of limbs that both ended in long, bony fingers. Out of the arch of their backs emerged curved necks and broad, oval-shaped heads. Three sets of curious,

large eyes regarded him.

`Hu - hullo?' Steven shifted carefully towards one of the creatures. It scuttled towards him, and even as he flinched, it took his shoulder in one of its hands - or were they feet? - and helped him sit comfortably.

`They're quite friendly, really,' Vicki nodded. 'They've been keeping an eye on us!' Another creature shuffled to and fro in front of her. 'I think they want us to go with them!' She offered her free hand, and, hesitantly, the creature took it, closing it gently in the fingers of its foot.

8

The creatures guided them, shuffling steadily further out underneath the curve of metal that hung above them. Vicki took to her feet quite soon, but Steven crouched until he could be sure he wasn't going to bang his head. He didn't want to stand up too quickly, anyway; he was still feeling rather bruised.

As they emerged from the shadow of the vessel, he could see that they were on a raised platform, which led down onto a vast factory floor. Light diffused throughout the space from arc lamps that were strung up randomly in the distance, and there were occasional flashes from behind them as well. Once they had walked down onto the floor, their escorts slowed down; Steven took the opportunity to stretch some life back into his aching limbs, then looked back at the structure they had emerged from underneath.

It certainly looked like a spaceship, he thought. There was something very familiar about its flattened, almond-like shape, in fact. The bursts of light were the sparks from more machinery, he realised, and they revealed further creatures scurrying over the outside of the construct. A framework of scaffolding and gantries surrounded the rear side of the object, curving with its curves, and the creatures were swinging between these like orang-utans, pulling past each other. Far beyond the construction, Steven could make out the uneven wall of the factory. It was dark, badly lit, but he thought he could see a pair of huge doors on the other side. This was more like a hangar than a factory.

His attention was caught by movement on top of the object. A clump of the creatures was trying to connect a vast cable to the construct, twisting it into the surface, and in its exertions one of

them was thrown from the scaffolding. Steven stepped forward instinctively, but the creature grabbed the legs of one of its colleagues, and began to swing itself back up.

Steven's guide gave a high-pitched warble, opening one of its hands as though making a presentation of the thing to him. It was like watching a troupe of clowns trying to build a liner, he thought. Vicki laughed.

`They're engineers, aren't they?' She looked at Steven. 'Handymen!' she concluded proudly.

Steven suppressed a smile. He turned to their guide. 'What are you building here?' he asked, slowly. The handymen exchanged glances, their eyes blinking. Steven's escort brayed, the noise dipping and rising as it moved its head from side to side.

They don't understand us,' said Vicki.

Ì'm not so sure,' replied Steven. He gestured at the object, as though that would prompt the creatures, or even his own memory. He paused, then looked at it more closely. Were those vents at the back? Energy channels of some kind? He wagged his finger decisively.

Ì h *ave* seen this before. Or something very like it' He looked from Vicki 9

to the handymen. 'It's a weapon, isn't it? A space cannon: He took Vicki's arm, and, in the light from the machinery that moved across the weapon's surface, he began indicating certain features:These channels must be the ends of the corridors we landed in. They'll begin to generate a highly intense plasma cloud' - now he gestured to the section where the handymen had been connecting the cable - 'which is contained in a magnetic field created by that resonator.' He turned back to the handymen. 'Then the polarity is reversed, and the plasma is drawn back though the channels and vents - like the one we fell through - and out through the barrel of the cannon. It creates an enormous, focused beam of energy' He paused, looking at his guide. 'I'm right, aren't I?'

Vicki tugged at his sleeve.

`But what about the Doctor? And the TARDIS?' she hissed. 'If they're inside...'

Steven hesitated, then spoke. 'I shouldn't think your handymen are going to activate this any time soon.They've some way to go yet, and they don't seem to be making a desperately good job' His guide hopped over to him, brushing its fingers against his leg. Steven glared. The handyman touched him once more, then turned and started to scuttle away across the floor of the hangar. The others began to usher Vicki and Steven after the guide.

`Wait: called Steven, 'where are we going?'

The creature didn't stop, but looked back at him, rolling its head.

The handymen steered them past a number of their kind, who were carrying components across their backs, securing cables and weaving their way across the floor. Steven was frustrated: there didn't seem to be any pattern to their activity, no design. Was there even anyone in charge here?

The floor was littered with panels and other equipment; the handymen scuttled around these, and he and Vicki followed. Eventually, the group arrived at an arched structure, somewhere between a ladder and a bridge, in the corner of the hangar. The fast handyman swung its way up, the remaining two hooting and jiggling on the floor behind Steven and Vicki until it was clear that they wanted the pair to follow.

`You go first: Steven prompted Vicki.

be right behind you, in case

you fall:

"thanks,' she muttered.

The ladder curved into an opening in the wall, level with the middle of the construct. Vicki clambered through and, finding the floor solid once again, turned and waited for Steven. As the two handymen followed him up, Steven took another look across the hangar. The handymen were everywhere, scurrying around beneath them, across from them, some even hanging from the galleries above the weapon. He noticed two of the 10

creatures carrying a large tray of components across the floor, from which items occasionally dropped, adding to the general mess.

`Come on!' cried Vicki. Steven clambered over to her, and taking

his hand, she hauled him through the opening and into a spherical chamber.

It was much dimmer in here, with a smaller number of the creatures, but Steven could make out a control bank on the other side of the room. Vicki pointed at a panel that was lit up.

'Look! Isn't that a radar?'

They crossed the room, and leaned over the bubble of the screen. The first handyman - Steven supposed he was some kind of foreman, though not a very effective one - had stretched an arm across it, and was adjusting some controls. Steven peered at the radar panel as the creature withdrew its arm. The instrumentation looked familiar, and although the symbols that flashed across it were as indecipherable as those they had seen inside the cannon, he reckoned the calibration and vectors would be easy to work out.The panel was definitely made of some different material to the rest of the control bank, however, and was surrounded by scorch marks. Perhaps it had been welded into place.

'They don't take very good care of this, do they?' Vicki pointed out.

Ì'm not sure, replied Steven. `These are actually quite like the scorch marks we saw back there:

The foreman touched the screen again, and a wobbly new light appeared on it, slowly closing in on the centre of the radar. The creature gave a low, crooning noise. Steven frowned, then made a quick calculation. He tapped the screen, tracking the main light gently with his finger.

"That's an approaching craft, right?' His voice became firmer, more definite, as he spoke. 'It's going to be in range in less than a day!'

Vicki gasped. 'Do you think it's their enemy?' She gestured at the handymen.

Steven looked at them. How could they possibly have any enemies? But then, why would they be building the weapon otherwise? They weren't exactly the most accomplished engineers he'd ever seen. It must be a last-ditch attempt at self defence.

'I suppose it must be; he said eventually. 'What else would they be building this weapon for?'

`They're actually going to use that?' squeaked Vicki. 'But you said - '

Ìt's nowhere near ready, no: Steven rubbed his head.

`Wouldn't it - wipe out the enemy fleet?'

'It's a pretty desperate measure. If they want to use it, they must have powerful enemies:

`Then shouldn't we help them?'

'We should find the Doctor and get back to the Ship: Steven hesitated, 11

glancing at the screen again. 'Perhaps there isn't enough time. Vicki looked at him imploringly. All right. We help them, then - and they help us find the Doctor and the TARDIS: He moved back across the chamber, and looked from the opening at the handymen swinging through the rigging and scurrying over the construction. 'Here's what we'll need to do.'

The Doctor had spent an hour or more venturing deeper into the outside structure, the structure that surrounded and contained the corridors in which the TARDIS had materialised. In that time, he had formed a good idea of what these creatures were like. As Steven had suggested, they must have a stooped posture, and would move close to the surface. The Doctor's own stumbling progress along the squat confines of the tunnels, which were very haphazardly arranged, seemed to prove as much.The surfaces were cluttered with handholds and random rungs or handles, and he prodded the floor in front of him with his cane to ensure he didn't catch his feet.And, although these tunnels were slightly better lit than the original corridors, the Doctor had still had to resort to his matches.

As he approached a junction, two of the creatures bounded by in front of him. Quickly, the Doctor found a shadow in which to hide himself, and shook his match out in the darkness. He heard a rattling noise, and he peered out after the creatures; they had machine parts strapped to their backs. Beasts of burden? Their feet had seemed too developed for that, he pondered, almost as if they had been running along on their hands.

He leaned back in the darkness, putting out his cane to steady himself again. It found no wall, no floor, and he stumbled over, catching his shin on an upright metal plate. He regained his balance, mopping his head with his handkerchief, then took out the box of matches again.There was the rasp of a match-head on the side of the box, and the new room glowed around him.

The Doctor lifted the match and the far wall of the room lit up, showing a huge curved panel, covered in luminescent symbols. Row upon row of them, they took light from the Doctor's hand, casting it back with a chilly, white glare. The wall around the panel, and occasionally the panel itself, was marked with scorches. The Doctor squinted. Each of the marks mimicked one of the symbols, it appeared, but whoever had made them seemed to have given up, as the scorching was only sporadic.The Doctor rubbed his chin.

This was unusual. He could understand almost any language, but the way these symbols were arranged was quite unlike anything he had ever seen. Suppose this wasn't a language, then? Perhaps it was a code? Or 12

something that didn't quite fit into a language at all? The scorch marks could be a failed translation... Ah-hah!

The Doctor shook out the match, then scuttled across to the doorway.

The corridor was silent. Excellent: he had evidently made his way into some underused part of the creatures' habitat. He scampered back across the room. Placing his monocle in his eye, he looked at the glowing pattern **of** symbols.

`Now let me see...'

Six of the handymen carried the TARDIS in, bracing it across their backs **and** supporting it with a foot each. Vicki watched as they set it down near her, forming up in a loosely organised way around it. Steven had certainly worked hard at drilling them properly, she thought.

In the hours since he had taken charge, the hangar had changed considerably. The floor around the cannon was clear, and parts and panelling were stacked around its edges. A small number of handymen were putting the final components in place on the cannon, with the foreman co-ordinating them. But perhaps the biggest change of all, Vicki reflected, was that she could see all this, all the way across the factory floor to the hangar doors, in fact. It still wasn't bright, exactly,

but it was certainly better lit than it had been. Steven had taken the best part of an hour just working out the level of lighting most suited to the creatures, **and** then cannibalising his broken torch and showing the handymen how to build their own lighting rigs. And this was the result. The cannon dwarfed the handymen, Vicki thought, making them look tiny.

She hoped it had been worth Steven's effort, and hers, to help them.

Steven stood in the opening of the control chamber. He was exhausted, **but** as he scrambled down the ladder and made his way across the floor **to** where Vicki was waiting by the TARDIS, his limbs sagged with relief. He patted the surface of the Ship and looked at the creatures with a smile.

`Thank you. His words rang across ***the*** near-silence of the factory floor.

`Well,' Vicki sighed, 'this is it.

Ànd bang on time,' Steven added:The enemy craft is moving into range **right** now'

Vicki stared at the cannon:I suppose we'll find out how well it works **when** we switch it on,' she opined.

Steven nodded stiffly. 'Yes. I've left a group of handymen in the control chamber. They're preparing to open the hangar doors - just waiting for **my** signal'

`We're just going to blast the aliens out of space?'

`Well it was your idea to help!' Steven protested. Before he could continue, there was the sound of scuffling from one of the galleries. The **13**

two of them looked across to see a group of handymen shepherding the Doctor down a gangway towards the floor. When he spotted Steven and Vicki, his voice rose.

`Stop! Stop this at once!' He shook his cane at the creatures as they drew to a halt, though they didn't seem too keen to get close to him.

`Goodness gracious! What has all of this been in aid of, mmm?'

`Doctor!' Steven beamed:Great timing. Where have you been?'

`My boy, you must get these creatures to cease this project immediately'

Ît's a little late for that; breezed the young man.

`But you don't understand what *this* is; the Doctor waggled his cane at the construct:You don't understand what you've been doing! This device is an energy cannon of enormous power. The corridors that the TARDIS

landed in are the conduits for that power, and when it operates at maximum, er, capacity, it could destroy an entire fleet of spacecraft!'

Now Steven sighed:Take it easy, Doctor. We know what this is for.'

`The handymen have to defend themselves,' blurted Vicki. 'The aliens'

spaceship is nearly here!'

The Doctor breathed deeply, tapping the end of his cane on the floor.

The creatures shuffled nervously around him. Along the side of the hangar, a stack of machine parts rattled as one of them brushed against it.

The Doctor levelled a finger at his two companions.

`Why do you suppose these creatures, these... handymen, had failed to complete the cannon, mmm? They clearly had enough technical skill to build the entire hangar, the entire factory in the first place. So why would they take on a project that demanded such skill, such expertise, if they couldn't finish it themselves? Why would they use equipment they were not familiar with? Technology they even had to explain to each other?' He paused, giving Steven and Vicki the chance to exchange a look.

`Those scorch marks were writing, weren't they?' Steven realised. The Doctor nodded.

He began pacing the floor, staring at the creatures until they backed out of his way. 'I have just spent several hours in this, ah, arsenal, looking at more of those illuminated symbols, symbols that these poor creatures tried to translate; he continued, patting the lapel of his jacket. 'By a process of deduction and deciphering, I was able to discover what they were. They were instructions for putting this, this monstrous thing together: He rounded on Steven, stopping him before

he could protest:I haven't finished!' He breathed out. 'These instructions were, however, inaccurate. Or, should I say, the language in which they were *written* was inaccurate. That is, er, why it took me so long to translate it'

With this, the floor began to rumble with a deep, bass note that gradually grew louder.

`What's happening?' Vicki cried.

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`The enemy!' yelled Steven, 'They're here!' He rushed to the bottom of **the** ladder, calling up to the creatures in the control chamber. 'Get ready **to -** '

'I don't think so, my boy,' the Doctor snapped. 'Quickly - into the TARDIS!'

`But -

`Do as I say!' The Doctor pushed open the door of the Ship, and bustled Vicki inside. Steven remained at the bottom of the ladder.

'Doctor, they helped us find you, find the TARDIS. We have to help them.

We can't just leave!' He was shouting, he realised, above the rising volume.

'We can and we must; the Doctor replied. His tone was even, despite **the** noise. He held Steven's gaze.

Slowly, reluctantly, Steven turned from the ladder and made his way **back** across to the TARDIS. He stood in the doorway and took one last look **back** at the handymen.

'Goodbye. Good luck.' He spoke quietly to the foreman, his words almost lost in the din. All the time, he could feel the Doctor's eyes on him.

He stepped inside, and the Doctor followed. The door rattled shut behind **the** pair of them.

'**I** can't believe you're letting them dock,' muttered Steven.

The Doctor had activated the scanner, and Steven could see that the

entire hangar was now vibrating with the noise.The volume peaked, then **there** was a dull, metal clanging sound, and stacks of panels toppled to the floor, sending the handymen scattering in confusion. All his effort - for nothing.

'The other vessel is not bringing the enemies of your crew; the Doctor **said.** He was moving around the console, preparing the TARDIS for flight.

Steven and Vicki continued to watch the scanner. A circular section of **the far wall -** one Steven hadn't noticed before, by the hangar doors **-**

swung round and up, revealing a new corridor beyond. Crisp, white light **shone** across the factory floor like the beam of a torch. Indistinct silhouettes appeared there.

Steven breathed out. 'I don't believe it'

'Oh, but you must, my boy, you must; the Doctor rumbled.

'We've got to get out there again - I can explain to them, persuade them **not** to use the cannon'

'And how would you do that?'

Steven was silent. Vicki looked from one to the other.

'I don't understand. Who are they? What are they doing here?' she asked.

Instructions.They 'My dear; the Doctor sighed, 'the symbols were not simply a set of were a contract - a contract between your poor handymen

and a race too miserly, too high and mighty, to do its own dirty work'

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Steven was watching the scanner intently. Four upright figures strode from the docking corridor and were now coming into view, removing the helmets of their spacesuits. Vicki gasped.

`Human beings; the Doctor sneered.

16

A Good Life

Simon Guerrier

'I'll have a pint of cider too, please,' said the Doctor. He had been acting oddly all afternoon, and now, in this cosy little pub somewhere in sixteenth-century Kent, he was ordering alcohol. It wasn't like him at all, and Charley had only recently begun to suspect why. For the first time since she had joined him on his travels, she found her enthusiasm waning, found herself giving serious thought to leaving him. After all, she could live quite happily somewhere like this.

An hour or two before they had got to ordering drinks, the TARDIS had landed on a pretty hill, overlooking meadows and fields. Charley, still sporting a black eye and all-over bruises from their last adventure, had been speechless. For the first few minutes they had simply stood outside the TARDIS and breathed it all in.The air, pure and clean, had been a tonic.

After all the spaceships and future cities she'd been to, a simple, natural landscape was exactly what she needed.

Charley soon realised why it seemed so familiar. The day felt like Midsummer - that idle kind of afternoon she remembered as a child. The sort of afternoon for picnics and climbing trees. Even hours later, she could still feel that blissful familiarity inside her.

At first, she had wanted to kiss him. But the Doctor's expression had given the game away: he hadn't brought her here on purpose. He always had that disquieted look when they landed somewhere strange. His brow creased and his eyes twitched feverishly from detail to detail, puzzling out the new world.

The TARDIS had thought they were on the other side of the universe, **of** course, and the Doctor couldn't bear not knowing where they'd really ended up. He had made some claim that knowing their true position would mean he could recalibrate the TARDIS's instruments. But she'd heard that excuse before: he just wanted to explore.

Eager to get going, his only concession to the heat had been to tug off his frock coat and throw it back into the ship. Then he had undone his cravat and the top buttons of his shirt.

And what if it starts raining?' Charley had asked, piously.

Then I shall get wet,' he had said. He had marched off down the hill, expounding airily how they'd better find out where they were and when.

Charley had thought to close the TARDIS door before scurrying after him.

Running through the knee-high grass had brought back vivid sensations 17

of childhood holidays. She could have cried out with glee but for the dull ache in her limbs. She had kept running, knowing the Doctor would only leave her behind if she didn't catch up. He always appeared to heal faster than she did, and he might already have forgotten she'd even been hurt.

When Charley had caught up with him, the Doctor had pointed out the grafting done on the trees around them. There had been round bulges at the top of the trunks, from which all the branches sprouted. Charley wouldn't have noticed if he hadn't pointed it out. Normally, he'd said, in nature, branches would appear in increments up the trunk of the tree. It showed the land had been worked on, that there were farmers, or at least gardeners, nearby. He had pointed out species of wild flower and spoken knowledgeably about different kinds of apple tree and varieties of grass, concluding from the accumulated evidence that they had landed in Sussex, or possibly in Kent. But Charley hadn't needed these tiny details to know that they were home.

She would have said, but the Doctor had got onto the composition of the atmosphere now. A greyish haze in the air meant that though the day was sunny and warm, they couldn't see the sun. That meant, he'd said, he'd have to guess which way was west, trusting his instincts to keep them walking in the same direction. Inevitably he had better instincts for this than mere mortals like Charley. Around then she had stopped listening to his flitting observations, how each bit of the ecosystem worked and fitted together. He had simply missed the point that understanding didn't matter; nor did knowing the Latin names of the individual shrubs and flowers. It just felt so good to be out here, part of it all.The scientist in him got in the way.

With just the rhythm and pitch of his words in the background, the honeyed tone of his voice like advertisements on the wireless, she had drifted into daydream. Later she wondered if he'd done that on purpose, allowing her space to heal without making it explicit. His words were curing her, softly spoken magic spells.

Their walk had brought them to a dusty lane, wending its way between two fields.The Doctor had pondered the specific clues given

by the horse tracks evident in the ground. He had already begun to guess the century

- sometime after gunpowder and before the Industrial Revolution he said. Now, just from the marks left by horseshoes, he had reckoned on the sixteenth century.

The lane had led them into a village of timeless thatched cottages, the sort they put on postcards. Locals of various ages had eyed them warily as they passed by, but nobody had challenged them. The Doctor had smiled and said 'hello's and 'good afternoon's as if he owned the place.

Charley had just tried to seem invisible, but even she had noticed some 18

interesting details. The villagers were not exclusively white, as she might have expected from the sixteenth century. And the way the people stood, their faces - they all had something confident and knowing about their bearing. They didn't look like simple village folk.

She had tried to shake off her modern prejudices, remembering how the Doctor had laughed at her for saying that talkies would never catch on. Oh, he conceded that they lacked the zeal and imagination of silent flicks, but the way he laughed... it had made her feel like some primitive, a savage Girl Friday to his Robinson Crusoe.

Since it seemed to be the centre of this community, the Doctor had stopped at the pub. The old wooden tables outside were not taken, and Charley could think of nothing better than just to sit here and drink the afternoon in. A glass of something wouldn't go amiss either. But the Doctor had still been antsy. He had drawn Charley's attention to the fact that the pub didn't have a name. They might have expected a 'Red lion'

or a 'Green Man' legend hanging above the door. But if it was the only pub for miles around, Charley had said, it wouldn't need a name for people to know where you meant.The Doctor had looked, just for a moment, totally crestfallen, like she'd run off with his sweets. And in that moment she had understood his eagerness to pick over the details of everything around them. He had been trying to find something that didn't quite square.

Letting the sunshine and the quiet heal his wounds would never

be enough for him. He was bored, and needed to find something wrong here before he could enjoy himself: a mystery to solve. And Charley felt anger welling up in her at this. He wanted to pull down her paradise.

She hadn't said a word though, not yet, and had followed him inside.The pub was cool and quiet. A couple of burly men sat chatting at a table to one side. They had glanced up from their conversation, looked the newcomers over (or, at least, they looked *Charley* over) and then carried on their discussion. The big-haired lady behind the bar, however, had welcomed them warmly.

'I'm Jemima,' she had said, her accent rustic and oob-arring. "This is my place - ' She had tailed off when they got closer, taking in their bruises and bumps. Her sudden horror had melted quickly away. 'Been in the wars have we?' she had said.

Ì hope not,' the Doctor had said charmingly, leaning an elbow on the bar. 'Which wars did you have in mind?'

Jemima had rolled her eyes at Charley. She probably dealt with odd and drunken locals every day of her life, so the Doctor was no bother. `What'll it be dearie?' she had asked.

`What... what would you recommend?' Charley had replied, feeling garfish and silly, dwarfed by the matronly confidence.

`Cider's very good, though I says it m'self,' Jemima had said. Charley, 19

gratefully, had asked for a pint of that. Just the thing to perk her spirits up.

And that was when the Doctor had asked for a pint of the same.

`This alcoholic streak has come on very suddenly!' she said, hoping it sounded jovial and witty, not tired and cross like she felt.

Ì'd rather not chance the water; he whispered, keeping an eye on Jemima as she got the drinks. 'Sanitation doesn't catch on for another three hundred years'

The cider arrived and Charley took a long sip. How long had it been since she'd last had cider? This was thick, heady stuff, yet crisp and refreshing at the same time. Again fragments of memory came

flooding back. Her mum had loved cider, when no one was looking. Charley felt her eyes water.

`Said it was the thing!' grinned Jemima. 'Takes the edge off the day's work, my boys say!'

`How many children do you have?' the Doctor asked. He was always good with people's mothers.

`Six,' said Jemima, pleased to discuss them. Three boys. You?'

`Do they all live locally?' asked the Doctor, side-stepping her question.

`Most do. My second eldest, though. Headed out to see the world. Which village you two from anyway? Or are you from space?'

The Doctor almost spat his cider over the bar. Jemima slapped him helpfully on the back, laughing heartily 'Don't act all surprised at me, lad: she said. 'We may be out in the country but we still get our space travellers in here now and then, stopping by for a drink:

Charley didn't want to hear it. She took her pint, made some meek apology and headed outside, leaving the Doctor and Jemima to have it out between them.

Some time later, she didn't know how long, a man sat down beside her. It wasn't the Doctor. She didn't look round at the man as he probably wanted her to, allowing him to strike up conversation. She studiously ignored him, continuing to watch a group of children playing in a tree on the far side of the road. The man beside her said nothing, but she could hear his breathing, deep and calm. Curiosity getting the better of her, she eventually stole a quick glance sideways. The man was big-boned and thick set, wearing a white, collarless shirt. He had a lot of wild red hair. He looked, she thought in that instant, like a yokel.

`Who's your friend, Charley?' called the Doctor, stepping out of the pub.

Charley felt herself blush as she turned, properly this time, to the redheaded man beside her. His build suggested a life of gruelling physical labour. Something about that and the way he sat up straight, though, said it had been a hard but honest life. His brilliant green eyes twinkled at her, just for an instant, and then he stood up.

`Name's Bryn, said the man, reaching over to shake the Doctor's hand.

He had the same rustic accent as Jemima:You must be Charley's partner.'

He had picked up her name from the Doctor, she realised. He was covering for her.

Ònly in crime: the Doctor said. He plumped himself down opposite them. He hadn't brought his drink out with him. 'Bryn's a Welsh name, isn't it?'

Ì believe so, said Bryn.

Ìt means "Little Hill", I think,' said the Doctor. Are you Welsh?'

`Not that I can say,' said Bryn:You're a very learned sort, Doctor.'

Ì've been learning lots about this place,' the Doctor agreed. He turned to Charley:It's an old Earth colony, not the sixteenth century at all.That's why the TARDIS thought we were in deep space when we landed. I said she was probably right!'

`No you didn't, Charley reminded him. In fact he had slapped the console a couple of times, hoping the ship would change her mind.

Bryn ran his fingers through his beard:Sixteenth century?' he said:You two time-travellers or something?' He didn't sound convinced.

`That's us, said the Doctor breezily 'Charley's really from the nineteen-thirties:

Bryn's laugh shook the table and Charley had to grab her pint glass to stop the cider slopping over the sides. She raised an eyebrow at the Doctor, who shrugged.

`You needn't tell me where you come from,' Bryn assured them. 'We don't pay the war any heed this far out'

`That's good of you,' said the Doctor. Jemima's already let me off the price of two ciders, assuming we're refugees. She even offered us a room upstairs if we fancy staying a night or two:

Òh can we, Doctor?' asked Charley eagerly. The Doctor looked surprised, but Bryn - maybe noticing - quickly stepped in.

`You've *got* to stay,' he said. 'Not worth coming all this way if you can't

Manage a night!'

The Doctor, too polite to argue, conceded that they would accept Jemima's offer. But again Charley saw in him the restlessness, the need to find something he could fix. She bit her lip rather than snap at him in front of Bryn.

As the afternoon wore on, and after more ciders all round, Bryn magnanimously offered to treat the two travellers to dinner. By this time the pub was full of people, all finished from their work in the fields, and Bryn had to extend the invitation. It would be a banquet, he declared.The evening stayed so pleasant that they decided to eat outside, pushing together all the tables Jemima had to spare. She found some old sheets they could use for tablecloths. Only after they had laid out all her cutlery 21

did Bryn wonder aloud why he hadn't just opened up the village hall and had them all in to eat there. Bickering and teasing followed between the villagers, and Charley found herself joining in and laughing, loving every minute of it.

Bryn appeared to be some sort of village elder or mayor, though he didn't actually have a title that anybody used. Everyone was on first name terms anyway. At first Charley thought people just deferred to his natural, generous charm, but then she'd noticed the way he suggested things -

getting people to collect plates or glasses, or helping Jemima in the pub's kitchen. He was definitely the leader.

At dinner itself, that became more readily apparent.With over a hundred people gathered round them, it was Bryn who led the conversation, drawing tall tales from the Doctor. People chipped in to the stories - from a small child called Abel who kept asking why things happened, to an ancient old man whose name Charley never learnt, who refused to believe a word of it.The Doctor was singing for their supper, she realised.

And though she'd heard many of the stories before, he could tell a good yarn. She let herself be drawn in.

After a good few stories, the Doctor began asking questions about the village - politely expressing an interest the villagers were keen to satisfy.

Charley, though not really listening to any of this, still gathered more

than enough detail about the technological essentials the village *did* retain -

medicines and waterproofs and all manner of practical appliances - and the luxuries they had chosen to go without.They did not have radio, she noted. Nor did they have newspapers. 'No need: the ancient old man put in. 'We got Jemima if we want to know each other's business!'

The talking and joking carried on long into the night, though the numbers at the table slowly dwindled as villagers took their children home or made apologies for early rising and farm chores. When they started to run short on candles, there seemed to be a natural halt to the proceedings. The night was very black, and only now did Charley realise how strange it felt without the moon. That and the free-flowing cider brought on a sudden melancholy. She really was too far from home.

Eager to have something to do other than dwell, Charley helped Jemima and a number of others gather up the used plates and dishes.The activity took her mind off things, and she lost herself in the gossip about a boy one of the girls fancied. Somewhere in the clearing-up she got accepted by the villagers, came to feel as if she was one of them. They started teasing her about her posh accent and asking questions about her pretty-looking guy. With the women all remarking what a catch she'd made, Charley soon forgot how cross he'd made her earlier that day.

'He obviously adores you,' one of the girls insisted and, quite despite herself, Charley hoped that this was true.

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When she wearily came back outside into the dark, the washing-up all done, she found Bryn and the Doctor on their own. They were arguing.

`But it doesn't make any sense!' the Doctor insisted earnestly it doesn't *bane* to make sense,' Bryn replied. He sounded like he was just holding on to his anger. Like everyone else but the Doctor, he had been free with the drinking. Red faced and bleary-eyed, he wasn't up to a battle of wits.

`You're provoking him,' she warned the Doctor.

"That's what I said!' Bryn nodded, woozily 'Look, we're a long way

out from where you're from, and...'

`That's what you said before,' the Doctor interrupted.

`Doctor, let him finish,' said Charley

`But Charley; the Doctor appealed:There aren't any stars!'

She looked up and he was right. With only the couple of candles still burning to light them, the darkness pressed down on them heavily.

`We're a long way out,' Bryn slurred. 'That's what happens'

Ì'm going to bed; Charley muttered, but neither of the men heard her.

She stomped back to the pub and up to the small room Jemima had found her. But she couldn't sleep for the fury inside her. It wasn't just that the lack of stars in the sky was eerie. It was the vehemence with which Bryn had been arguing back, the tell-tale look in his eyes. He really was hiding something, something about the village that the Doctor had picked up on.

Charley, knowing too well that he had been right all along, hated him for it.

Tired and hungover the next morning, Charley had taken a book of short stories from the shelf in her room and gone out to read it in the apple orchard. In fact, she hadn't read a sentence all morning. She had flicked over the pages once or twice, then sat back in the grass and enjoyed the sun. She hadn't meant to fall asleep.

'Be careful you don't get burnt; advised the Doctor. He had stolen up on her silently, as ever.

Ì thought you'd be busy playing detective,' she told him, without opening her eyes.

Ì was,' he said. 'Or rather I wasn't. I've only found myself more unanswered questions. So I thought I'd come and pester you'

She listened to him sit down beside her, and then heard him leafing through her book. He didn't say another word. When she couldn't bear it any longer, Charley said, You can't be happy

here, can you Doctor?'

He sighed:Do you really want me to tell you?'

She sat up. The Doctor still had on the wing-collared shirt and silk waistcoat he had worn the day before. Charley wondered whether, like her, he had been offered a change of clothes by Jemima. Putting on the 23

simple blouse and full-length skirt they had given her had felt odd until she had stepped outside and realised how unstrange she now seemed to everybody else, how easily she fitted in. Perhaps the Doctor had declined the offer of a costume more fitting with their surroundings because he liked wantonly playing the outsider. Or maybe, she thought, he just knew he could never really belong. Sat there, staring through the trees, he seemed forlorn and infinitely lost.

`When we first met Jemima, she said her son had moved out of the village: the Doctor began. 'He's not the only one to have disappeared.

Their parents say they go off to find other villages, but they're never heard from again:

The villages must be isolated...' said Charley, not even convincing herself

`But Jemima is used to visitors - she even knows travellers from space.

So why doesn't she get word back from her son? He doesn't even send postcards! And that's not the worst of it. They don't talk about it. The people I spoke to this morning, it's like a guilty secret. They stopped whispering to me when their neighbours passed by'

`You think something's happened to the young people?'

'If there's nothing sinister going on, what are they hiding?'

`But they seem so happy here,' Charley said, lamely

`Do they?' he said. 'You talk to Jemima about her missing son. She's heartbroken!

`What will you do?' Charley asked, apprehensively.

Ì think we should both talk to Bryn again'

Bryn didn't bother to hide his anger when the Doctor and Charley

confronted him. He was furious with them for snooping, especially after all the kindnesses the village had showed them.

`How many of us have you talked to?' he demanded.

The Doctor looked a bit sheepish. 'Well, I tried to raise the questions in the pub, but Jemima assumed I had been drinking. That rather took the wind out of it!

"The villagers are happy, I can assure you,' said Bryn.

`What have you done to them to make them so docile?' the Doctor asked.

Bryn, rather than becoming angrier, tutted. 'You really didn't arrive here by normal means, did you?' he said 'I found the blue box on the hill.

Strangest starship I ever clapped eyes on. What does it do? Put a hole in hyperspace or something?'

Òr something,' replied the Doctor, cautiously

'That's not answering the Doctor's question: Charley reminded him.

Bryn shook his head. 'It isn't like you think, he said. 'Let me show you
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what I show all the kids who get the wanderlust and want to visit other places. Then you'll understand:

Despite Charley's reservations, the Doctor seemed content to follow Bryn. Without a word more he took them out of the village and along the lane, finally coming to a small wooden shed, sheltered under a tree. Bryn fussed in his pockets for the key, then let them inside. Packed into the shed were all kinds of farming tools - hoes, scythes, blades of one kind or another, a couple of ploughs. But what Bryn had obviously brought them to see was the motor car, floating two feet from the ground.

It had the look of a Bentley, Charley thought; the gracefully sweeping curves of the body and the plush comfort inside. Bryn opened the door and Charley climbed aboard. The car dipped ever so slightly under her weight, and she realised it didn't hang from any supports - it literally floated above the ground. The Doctor, who clearly admired the machine but was still too suspicious of Bryn to say so, took the

passenger seat next to her.

Bryn ran his fingers expertly over the controls.The car sidled gently out of the shed, which Bryn closed and locked before taking his place in the driving seat. He pushed a button and suddenly they were racing off across the fields. The speed even startled the Doctor, who grabbed Charley's hand. But it was only the incredible rate of the trees and shrubs they sped by that told how fast they were going. The car flew smoothly, and if Charley closed her eyes she could hardly feel them moving at all.

There were miles and miles of lush greenery.The car was terribly quiet

- if Charley strained to hear she could just make out the engine purring gently. Still nobody said a word.The Doctor, for all he tried to look serious, was clearly loving the ride. He'd always had a thing for machines. He'd probably insist he got to drive on the way back. If there was a way back.

He sat watching the beautiful scenery speed by, counting slowly on the fingers on one hand. He had got onto the other hand before Charley asked **him** what he was measuring.

`Miles, approximately,' he said. In the couple of minutes they had been moving, apparently, they had already covered seven.

Soon after the Doctor had had to start again on his first hand -

somewhere about the eleven-mile stage - the greenery all around them stopped abruptly. The ground was now gleaming white like porcelain.

Following the Doctor's cue, Charley didn't say a word. But the perfect surface fascinated her, and she stared over the edge of the car, watching her amazed reflection looking back up at her.

After another mile or two, judging by the Doctor's fingers, a sheer white porcelain cliff rose up in front of them, reaching higher and further than Charley could see in all directions.

Ìt's a huge city!' she gaped.The Doctor smiled at this, and again she felt 25

like the savage beside him. How long ago had he guessed what they would see?

Bryn brought them right up to the walls of the city. Getting nearer,

Charley could see tiny square holes into the cliff, quickly realising that these were vast bay windows. The scale of the city walls was boggling.

Why, she wondered, didn't the villagers live inside it any more? What calamity had driven them outside? To live like they were back in Earth's old days?

As soon as Bryn brought the car to a halt, Charley leapt out and dashed over to the windows, eager to see the science-fiction furnishings inside.

But the other side of the glass proved entirely dark. She could just glimpse occasional pinpricks of light in there, nothing substantial. Maybe her eyes would get used to the darkness the more they looked, and then she'd be able to see the city's streets and *houses*.

Ìt's daunting, isn't it?' said Bryn. He and the Doctor had taken their time in joining her.

`What are the speckles in there?' she asked.

The Doctor hardly smiled. 'They're stars, Charley' he said.

She gaped at him. Eventually she managed to say, 'I don't understand: The Doctor took her hand.

`We're inside a cargo bay,' he said, 'on a very big spaceship.'

`But how?' was all Charley could say.

`Yes, how?' said the Doctor:This is your chance to crow,' he told Bryn.

Bryn seemed quite happy to tell them:We were a colony ship,' he said.

`Loaded with everything we needed to build a new world. Should have been a matter of routine. Only a security officer got woken early from cryo-sleep. Well, he came down onto this deck to find... a paradise:

`They were letting the topsoil you'd brought with you grow while you were all asleep, weren't they?' said the Doctor, almost allowing himself to sound impressed:Good, rich topsoil is one of the hardest things to fake,'

he told Charley. 'But Bryn's people developed it like lawn turf.'

`That's probably right,' said Bryn. 'Anyway, the security officer woke

some of the others, and some of them moved in. The others went back to sleep, ended up on some planet of rocks and sand, and made the most of it. I reckon we got the better deal. We missed the war being here, and we've missed the politics:

And all just by keeping your distance from the rest of humanity,' the Doctor said darkly 'So do your villagers know what's going on? What they're living in?'

`We bring them out here when they're eighteen, Bryn said. And they're given the choice to stay. Most are fine with it all, but now and again we get youngsters who want to...' Bryn searched for the right words:To see the universe:

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Ànd I suppose now Charley and I will have to suffer the same fate?' the Doctor asked:The price for asking questions?'

`Surely not!' said Charley. She looked imploringly at Bryn. 'You can't mean to kill us!'

`Why would I kill you?' asked Bryn, and he actually sounded shocked.

Ì've seen this sort of thing before; said the Doctor coolly.

`We're not like the rest of the universe here,' Bryn said, his tone level.

`We don't kill our children.A cruiser comes and picks them up'

Òh; said the Doctor after a moment's silence. 'I'm sorry' he went on. 'I thought - '

`We've got good links with a colony on Basla 19,' Bryn went on. 'We allow them occasional visits to the village in return. I think they're studying us or something. And everybody's happy.'

`Well that's all right then; said the Doctor. But he still sounded angry.

Charley wondered if it was just because he'd been wrong. She tried to take his arm but he shook her off.

Bryn drove them back to where the TARDIS had landed, the hill surrounded by meadows and fields.The Doctor sat in silence in the back of the car, sulking. Charley ignored him and drank in the surroundings. It didn't matter that she knew, it didn't matter one bit. She felt at home here, comfortable, relaxed and happy. Didn't she

deserve that? Didn't he owe her that much?

Bryn had made several attempts to start conversation, to get the Doctor to respond. Charley found that made her even more embarrassed, his silence not just churlish but rude. The car stopped at the top of the hill, and the Doctor leapt down to the ground. Then he remembered his manners, and turned back to help Charley down. She smiled, but he didn't smile back and hardly even met her eye. He marched over to the TARDIS

and fished in his pocket for the key. He hadn't even looked Bryn's way.

Charley made a show of shaking Bryn's hand.

Às I understand it,' he said to her, we don't have the same problems other colonies do. We've got away from pollution, processed food, the corporate greed and twenty-four-hour broadcasting, and we're not making **our** own versions of the same'

Ìt's perfect here,' agreed Charley.

Òh Charley!' the Doctor said, over by the ship. He shook his arm at the world around them:None of it is true!'

`They're not hurting anybody, Doctor,' she told him. 'They're just getting **on** with their lives in their own way.And it's a good life.You must see that?'

`But what about the truth?' he said.

`Doctor please stop,' she said, verging on tears. 'It's lovely here, can't you **see?** People are happy, and all you want to do is ruin it'

The Doctor looked at her long and hard, making her feel terrible. She couldn't remember the last time he had looked at her, *really* looked at her.

But now she didn't like it. She didn't know whether his steely gaze showed disappointment or horror or despair, but it made her feel just awful. She longed for him to look away. Would he just open the TARDIS

door again and go inside? If he did turn his back on her, it would make it easier. Maybe it was time to let him go.

Ì'm sorry,' he breathed, so quietly she almost didn't hear him. And she knew it wasn't just about the village. He'd been looking again at her black eye and bruises.

They stayed for a holiday.

28

Reversal of Fortune

Graeme Burk

8.

Mikhail's own vital signs had become music to him. It was not particularly interesting music - the slow *beep, beep, beep, beep* was more like the sort of monotonous chanting one heard in Buddhist temples. Except for the high pitch.

Perhaps it was a Buddhist temple filled with cats?

Mikhail laughed so hard he began to cough. For an instant his vital signs became bee-bop-syncopation and arrhythmia.

Al! that was left was the music of his heartbeat and brainwaves.

And the noises.

And, of course, the ghosts.

Beep. Beep. Beep. Beep.

Pris came to visit every day. Mikhail could hear her talking when he was on the edge of sleep - or, rather, the edge of the drip provided by the medicomp - speaking in a whisper to someone else. She always spoke in a whisper, as though not wanting to disturb Mikhail. Mikhail kept trying to tell her it was all right. He was awake. He wanted to talk.

Beep. Beep. Beep. Beep.

Occasionally it drifted through his mind: who could Pris be talking to?

There was no one else on board.

Mikhail would then realise that not even Pris was there, really.

Just him.And the music of his heartbeat and brainwaves.The melody of human decay.

And the noises.

And, of course, the ghosts.

The ghosts had come earlier that day. They lived in the machinery, the unseen works below `1•1' level that sustained the futile motion of the ship.

They escaped through the ductworks, chittering and hissing. Mikhail pleaded for them to go but they hovered over him, pressing their phantom fingers to his brow.Threatening to have their revenge.

They liked to tease him.Torture him. But Mikhail no longer knew where he ended and the machines began.There was no escape.

Mikhail would always protest. Plead. Promise anything. Only if they would stop.

After a while, though, he just let them have their way. He knew the ghosts were only taking their due.

29

Deep inside, Mikhail knew he *deserved* it.

Beep. Beep. Beep. Beep.

Once they were gone, all that was left was the music.

He could tell that the Doctor was next to him. Not just because of the extra harmony of his craft landing in the sickbay. No, it was that smell again. It had taken him the last few years, but he had finally figured out what it was about the Doctor's smell that he recognised.

The Doctor smelled of other places. Places with greenery and other people.

He smelled of *outside.*

Mikhail heard himself speak.

`Hello, old friend'

Ì' m sorry. Have we met before?'

That rich, sweet voice. It had been years since he last heard it. Mikhail reached out. His hand brushed against crushed velvet and then silk brocade. He didn't need sight to know it was him.

Mikhail's voice was dry like bone.

`You said that to me when we first met, Doctor. I thought you were a freak even then. It was the first time I had ever seen anyone so sad'

Ìt seems I've forgotten what I've done tomorrow again. How long have you been hooked up to this machine?'

`Kidney failure happened... Oh, it happened a while ago. Then the other thing.Then the other thing. My body is in full cascade failure. I was telling Pris the other day.'

`Pris?'

`You know damn well who she is'

Mikhail paused. His redundant eyes darted uselessly around the sick bay.

No. No. No.

They were coming through the noises in the ship.Through the hum of the hull plating.Through the indefinable squeaks of the floor.Through the vibrations of the engines.

They were coming for him again.

Ìs there something wrong?'

`Go away.'

Ì'm sorry?'

`Go away. All of you. Please leave me alone. No, take him. Him! This is all his fault'

`Look, let me help you. I can...'

`Help?! You?!'

Mikhail laughed. His vital signs played more bee-bop. He found

himself hissing as he spoke.

`Your help has kept me alive all these years, Doctor. Thank you very much. Your help I can do without'

30

`Whatever it is that's scaring you, I can help ... '

`No! I don't want your balloon!'

They were all around him, becoming even louder.

Mikhail felt the tears warm his cheeks. Shutting his ineffective eyes, he screamed.

Please take me! Take me! Please!'

The ghosts enveloped him.They were closer than he had ever felt them before.

`There's nothing there.You're talking to nobody'

Mikhail heard a familiar voice speak to him. It was speaking, not whispering. It was audible. Talking to Mikhail.

Mikhail smiled beatifically.

`Pris?'

His vital signs exploded into pure jazz; then there was a low, sustained tone.

Mikhail felt himself fall away. He was falling, but without any fear of hitting the ground.

But there was one last thing to say before he died. He felt the Doctor bending over him as he said in a rattling voice:

`Doctor, I forgive y - '

7•

The sound of Mikhail's cane echoed down the promenade deck. He hated walking through this part of the ship. Even though he now relied on a perceptikon to guide him, he still knew he was exposed. He didn't need to see to know he was in a wide open

space, and it still made his stomach rotate anti-clockwise.

There, there, Pris. It will be all right.

Talking to Pris was, relatively speaking, a new eccentricity Mikhail had picked up. In retrospect, he was amazed he hadn't started doing it sooner.

Now that he lived in the dark, he needed to talk to someone other than himself. Pris, he was sure, wouldn't have minded helping with that.

Mikhail's cane continued to clatter as it impacted on the stainless steel floor. He concentrated on the sound. It was a way to distract him as he made his way through the promenade. Make it into music. Pretend it's Buddy Rich on drums, and just hum the solo that you would think Charlie Parker might play while that was going on.

The perceptikon indicated there was another three hundred metres to the end of the promenade deck. It was going to be a long saxophone solo.

His arthritis was acting up - Mikhail wasn't going to get there anytime soon. Dizzy Gillespie might have to join in with a trumpet solo, soon.

Almost there, Pris...

31

Mikhail could hear the secondary compressors turn on deep below on

`N' level, the epicentre of a rumbling of air conditioning that would spread out over the network of ducting.

He had spent too much time with these noises. He knew them by heart, knew where each one came from, right down to its source in the ship schematics. It was if they were speaking to *him.* Voices in the ductwork.

Ghosts in the machine.

Sometimes he imagined what they might be saying to him. He didn't like thinking about that too much.

Here we are Pris. Let's see how things are this week.

Mikhail's fingers ached as he punched in the access code to the Engineering Junction Console. They were really meant to just assess the immediate environs, but it was too hard to clamber down to 'N' level any more, so he reprogrammed the EJC to give him data from the entire ship.

He had some trouble plugging the leads from the EJC into his perceptikon

- they really hadn't been designed with peripheral vision in mind - but he was soon able to 'see' the latest damage assessment.

As usual, nothing was wrong.

The hull had taken on some nicks and abrasions, mostly debris from a comet it had encountered eighteen months ago, but it would last decades before it needed any serious attention. None of the internal systems ever needed work. Quintuple redundancy. It required regular maintenance when there was a thriving, delicately balanced ecosystem of thousands.

A crew of one meant it never failed.

Being a multi-generational ship, it was designed to outlast Mikhail. With the course trajectory never to be deviated from again, it would go on to its destination in Galaxy Eight without anyone on board.

A ghost ship, with six thousand, three hundred and ninety-seven names listed on the memorial wall in the Recreation Dome.

Mikhail disconnected the leads to his perceptikon.

Well, that's it for another week, Pris. I guess we can go back home now.

Mikhail smelt something odd.

It was a smell he couldn't place. It was on the tip of his mind what it was, but he couldn't name it.

Someone spoke.

`Hello there.'

Mikhail screamed and tried to run.

It was *him.* He didn't want to talk to him.

He fumbled with his cane and eventually threw it to the ground, the collision booming through the promenade deck.The perceptikon became useless as Mikhail kept looking around too quickly for it to process the information. He hugged the wall, hoping it would steady him and guide him somewhere, anywhere. He eventually found a door.

32

As the door opened, Mikhail began to think about what direction in which he scampered away. If he went east, it would mean that he was at -

Oh no.

Mikhail grabbed the doorframe and tried to will himself to go through it He felt the yawn of the wide-open space of the Recreation Dome on his skin.

He tried to push himself through the door.

Mikhail sank to his knees, whimpering.

Mikhail could smell the Doctor nearby. He was trying to keep a discreet distance from Mikhail, but he could still smell him. What was that smell?

Mikhail spoke quietly.

Ìt would seem the onset of blindness had not abated my agoraphobia'

`You're agoraphobic?'

`Started about five, six years ago. Since the last time you saw me, anyway.'

Ì doubt it was the last time I saw you, but then my relationship to causality can be somewhat casual.'

'Do you want me to thank you for saving my life the last time? You might have been right, but you're still not getting any thanks from me:

'I'm not looking for thanks. I just wish I could help you:

`You have a lot of nerve saying that'

The Doctor sighed.

'I'm afraid I'm swimming against the tide. I know where I'm inevitably going to be taken, but I have to continue the direction I'm going in nonetheless:

Ì wish you'd just leave me alone'

`What have I done to make you so bitter?'

`You have to live with what happened every day, just as I do: Mikhail heard nothing more.

Not even the sound of the Doctor's footsteps as he left, though Mikhail knew from the dissipation of his smell that he had gone. He had even left Mikhail's cane beside him.

Mikhail struggled to right himself.

Let me tell you, Pris, who that bastard was then.

6.

Every empty cabin, every empty corridor, every empty deck, every empty space was filled with the sublimity of Billie Holiday. Her delicate, poetic phrasing of *Autumn In New York* was played so loudly as to drown out **all** the ambient noise - the sound of the air-con humming, the sound of **the** engine rumbling.

The sound of the hull plating slowly buckling.

The ship was within half a parsec of the event horizon. Mikhail could see on the viddy screen that the time was drawing near.

Mikhail sat on the floor of the bridge, holding in one hand a tattered photograph, and in the other a nearly empty bottle of vodka. He took another swig, marvelling at the way Holiday languidly rhymed 'Ritz' and ìt's _ divine' in a way that seemed utterly effortless.

He had not played any music in over a decade, but he thought that his demise was a special occasion.

The bottle of vodka landed on top of the other two Mikhail had drank.

That was another pleasure saved only for special occasions, like his death.

Ahead, the star classified in the navikom as Q-nine-fourteen was in the final throes of tumult before its eventual and inevitable collapse. After which, there would be a mammoth blast wave that ejected Q-nine-fourteen's envelope into interstellar space.

Q-nine-fourteen was birthing a supernova. It was due in less than an hour.

Mikhail opened another bottle. Billie Holiday began to sing *Autumn In New York* one more time.

When Mikhail awoke, he had a hangover.

He had a hangover.

He was awake.

He was still alive.

He looked up to see the Doctor leaning over the controls of the navikom.

Mikhail grabbed the first thing near his hand and threw a vodka bottle at the Doctor. Hungover, the best he could do was send the bottle bouncing off a display terminal.

Mikhail's aim was better when he bodily lunged at the Doctor, sending them both sprawling on the floor.

Mikhail tried to grab the Doctor's throat. His hand slid on the silk cravat as the Doctor's velvet arm attempted to block him.

`Why did you do that?! Why did you do that?!'

The Doctor grabbed Mikhail's shoulder. Spasms of pain screamed through his arm and he lost his balance on the Doctor.

Ì couldn't let you die'

`What difference would it make?'

Mikhail sat up and rubbed his arm. His voice sounded like a small boy.

`Do you know what it's like every day to wander the same miles of empty corridors and empty rooms? I made that wall and there's been nothing left for me since. The only person I ever see every few years is

you. The last person I ever want to see, and you keep showing up, trying to give me a new balloon. It doesn't work that way any more.'

34

Mikhail found himself making a high-pitched screeching noise that he supposed was laughter.

`Do you know what the funny part is? I don't have the guts to kill myself. Not directly. Every night for years I've thought of new ways of dying and I couldn't bring myself to do it. When the ship drifted toward...

toward that, I finally had the decision made for me. There was nothing I could do:

And suddenly his words became a conduit for his rage.

Ànd then you ruined it! Ruined it. Tell me what do I have to live for?

Why did you do it?! Why?'

The Doctor looked away, his long, angular face downcast.

`Would... Pris... want you to cheat living like this?'

Mikhail was silent. The Doctor walked toward the exit. He paused for a moment and spoke quietly.

`So live then. Live, if nothing else, then to spite me:

5•

Mikhail arrived in the recreation dome, as he always did every morning at oh-eight-hundred. He came with his equipment-cutting torch, power packs, bevelling gauge, safety equipment all freshly cleaned and organised.

He worked until seventeen-hundred each day, with thirty minutes for lunch. The only equipment he ever left behind was the swing seat and cables, because they were too difficult to shift. Otherwise, it was a job like any other that he treated with the same professionalism as any other.

Except, of course, it wasn't like any other job.

Today was his last day. He only had one name to finish. He put

himself **In** the swing seat, adjusted the harness and pulled himself up the wall.

Mikhail had divided up the wall into ten rows: nine of them bore seven hundred names each; the remaining ninety-seven names were orphaned twenty metres from the ground. Mikhail never thought this solution was particularly neat, but then death was never particularly neat with mathematics.

Mikhail reflected on the maths while he took out his bevelling gauge **and** mounted it to the wall. It had taken him nine hundred and eighty-seven days to finish this. It probably would have taken less time - at his **peak** he had been able to do seven names a day - had it not been for the **two** weeks spent recuperating after dislocating his shoulder and, consequently, the time it had taken to regain the speed and accuracy of makeshift 'chiselling' into solid duralynium.

Treat it just like any other job. Even though it isn't.

Mikhail finished with the '0' he had begun yesterday afternoon. It wasn't bevelled as well as he would have liked, but his shoulder was

bothering him.Then again, no one besides him would ever be this high up to see it this close.

Likely no one besides him would ever see the inside of the *Amandala* ever again.

He moved the bevelling gauge and began work on the 'F'. It had taken him months to get used to the stench of cutting duralynium; even more time to rig a torch capable of generating the energy necessary to cut it, while giving him the degree of accuracy he needed. The irony was he would have never have dreamt he was capable of creating such a thing, before the accident.

He whistled some John Coltrane. Small arcs of light danced off the surface of the wall as he imperfectly duplicated the virtuosity of *My Favourite Things.* He wasn't sure why he was whistling that. Maybe it was because he admired how Coltrane kept bringing the melody out of the cacophony and seeming chaos of the solos. 'Like dismantling time' was how he once had heard it described.

Mikhail would never check the performance to see if he had been doing the piece justice. He swore he would never listen to his music again. Listening to classical jazz, to his mind, was like pretending that

life went on. Life didn't go on.

He would pretend he was doing any other job, but that's as far as he would go.

He turned off the torch. Smoke still curled out of the recesses of the 'F'

now etched into the duralynium. He pushed himself in the swing seat away from the wall slightly to look at the name in full: **PRISTINA KRISTOF**

Seeing the name nearly caused Mikhail to void his stomach.

It was as though his entire body rebelled at once against almost four years of being told it was just another job. He grabbed his head and fought the vertigo he was now feeling.

He realised his swing seat was being lowered from below.

`You looked like you could use some help'

Instinctively, Mikhail grabbed the emergency release and dropped to the ground, nearly landing on top of the Doctor.

The Doctor read Mikhail's face immediately

`Let me guess.You don't want me helping you'

`Why did you come back?'

`There's a riddle to solve.Though I don't seem to be doing very well at solving it.'

Mikhail pointed to a fraction of the wall.Twenty metres high and forty metres long.Ten columns filled with names.

There are two names that should be on that wall, but aren't.Yours.And mine.'

Mikhail held the cutting torch tightly in his hand. It was pointed at the Doctor.

`We should be on that wall too for what we did, Doctor.'

Mikhail stared at his hand and the cutting torch, thinking about what

he would do next. The Doctor ducked his head down and peeked up at Mikhail, trying to regain eye contact.

`Killing me won't change what happened. Or will happen'

Mikhail thought for a moment. He then chuckled softly. The Doctor seemed confused.

`What is it?'

Mikhail started to laugh with anguish.

That time on the Perisphere. You knew what was going to happen then. Didn't you?'

He continued to laugh, turning away from the Doctor.

`When **I** turn around, if you're still there, I'm going to kill you'

4-

'Critical time update'

`Time to reactor core rupture: five minutes, twenty-six seconds'

"This is bad. This is very bad,' Mikhail muttered to himself as he ran toward the nearest inspection hatch.

He slid down the ladder from `K' level to 'M' level.The impact wrenched his ankle out of its normal alignment. Mikhail mouthed obscenities and stumbled toward the Engineering Control Room.

He found one of his assistants at the engine conduit control console.

Wong's face was badly blistered from the radiation leakage. God only knew what other internal damage he had suffered.

'Having a bad day, Wilbur?' Mikhail yelled at Wong over the growing whine of the engines.

'I've had better, Wong curtly replied, frantically slapping the console to **get** a response. Mikhail noticed Wong's hands had third-degree burns. It's **a full** cascade failure. We got screwed but good:

Mikhail toggled the voice command on the console. 'Critical time update:

The glacial computer voice spoke:rime to reactor core rupture: three minutes, fifty-seven seconds:

Mikhail punched the console in frustration. 'Get topside, Wilbur. I'll handle this:

'No way. I'm not leaving:

Ènsign Wong, get the hell out of here.That's an order.'

37

Mikhail watched as Wong considered for a moment and then ran toward the inspection hatch. Maybe it was actually giving an order for the first time in Mikhail's career that did the trick.

Not that getting out will do Wong any good if the reactor core ruptures.

Please tell me you're happy to see me:

Mikhail sighed with relief. 'It's about time you showed up, Doctor.'

The Doctor ducked around to look at the console. He had to shout over the engine noise, which had now grown to a full shriek. 'I'm usually timely, eventually. I was busy helping your captain divert the ship away from the asteroid swarm!

Òne of those rocks hit us at precisely the wrong spot.The reactor is in full cascade failure.The core will rupture in... Critical time update.'

`Time to reactor core rupture: two minutes, seventeen seconds.'

`Damn! The coolant injectors are offline. It could be twenty minutes before we get them back'

The Doctor looked at Mikhail quizzically. 'Have you thought of shunting the energy from the reactor?'

Mikhail shook his head. 'Shunting? It's never been done before:

`But it can be done? Theoretically:

`Yeah. I could flush it through the plasma streaming. But it's risky. It could react with the shield harmonics and create an EM theta pulse'

Mikhail paused. 'That would pretty much decimate any biomatter onboard:

Mikhail watched as the Doctor's face turned pale.

`Critical time update'

`Time to reactor core rupture: one minute, nine seconds'

`Doctor. What should we do?'

3•

Mikhail had looked forward to the promotion ceremony for days, and yet he couldn't wait to get out of the Recreation Dome as soon as he possibly could; after he'd finished the necessary schmoozing. The reception was still in full swing and Mariana wanted to stay, but he couldn't stand another minute in the Dome with so many people. He told Mariana he needed to stretch his legs alone, and she gave him a dirty look.

If she didn't want to be left holding the baby then she shouldn't have insisted on having one, Mikhail thought to himself

Mikhail walked onto the nearly empty promenade deck and stretched out his arms and upper body. The temporary peace and quiet was delicious. Mikhail reflected that there was one essential problem with living in permanent close quarters with almost seven thousand people: you had the vastness of interstellar space, but never any *personal* space.

With nearly everyone in the Dome, the promenade deck was an empty cathedral - a place of awesome, haunting beauty both for what was present and absent. For Mikhail, the only thing that would make it better would be to blare Miles Davis through the Tannoy.

Something flashed in the corner of Mikhail's eye. Green, like the old wine bottles his grandfather collected.A velvet coat?

Mikhail turned.

`Doctor?'

The Doctor had been watching Mikhail all this time. He avoided Mikhail's gaze and seemed slightly embarrassed.

`Doctor! It's me, Mikhail. Remember?'

The Doctor stiffly shook Mikhail's outstretched hand.

`Yes, it's... It's good to see you again, Mikhail'

`The captain didn't say anything about you being here. Were you at the promotion

ceremony?'

`No. No. I just... I just got here'

`Well you should go in. They have quite a nice spread. I just needed to get away from the crowds. I think I might be slightly claustrophobic: There was a pause.

Ìs there something wrong, Doctor? You look a bit distracted: Just thinking... about the future:

`Yeah. I've been doing a lot of thinking about that lately, too: The Doctor shuffled awkwardly. Mikhail took this as a cue that he wanted to be alone. `Look, I'll leave you be. Good to see you after all these years though: He turned away and set off in the direction of the Recreation Dome.

The Doctor called after him. Mikhail:

Mikhail craned his neck toward the Doctor. 'Yes?'

`Did you say a promotion ceremony?'

`Yeah. Big day for a bunch of us.You were right, Doctor. Understanding jazz and understanding systems, you remember? I managed to fast-track my way to the Chief Engineer's job after Rogers retired'

The Doctor uncomfortably flashed a smile. 'That must be very good news for you:

Ìt's the second best thing to happen to me this year.'

`The second?'

He reached into his tunic pocket and pulled out a photograph, already **a** little dog-eared in spite of being quite recent. It was a picture taken in the Recreation Dome, of a woman of medium height with dark curly hair **and** brown eyes. The woman was in the middle of saying something to **some** of her friends while holding a six-month-old girl in

her left arm.The **baby** was dressed in a pink sundress and wore a white cotton hat. Her **open,** expressive mouth and chin was covered in her own drool, but her 39

brown eyes - her mother's brown eyes - were looking intently around the Dome for something outside the camera's scope.

`Mariana and I named her Pristina. Pris for short:

The Doctor said nothing. Mikhail held the picture closer to him.

Ìt's like looking at a picture of the future, isn't it?'

But the Doctor was gone.

2.

To Mikhail's mind, it was the best place on the ship. He only wished it didn't have a three-week waiting list, or that he still required his parents'

permission to visit it.

Even so, Mikhail loved the rush that occurred when the Perisphere rose on its telescopic platform and extended itself to its full height half a kilometre above the rest of the ship. Then the sphere allowed an almost three-hundred-and-sixty-degree view of space.

It was the best place to go to get away from everyone. From everything.

Mikhail had brought some of his father's classical jazz KDs to play.

Mariana told him he was starting to move from having an interest in it to an obsession. His friends thought he was a freak for liking something so old and weird, but he couldn't get into Ikonik, and quad-dime sampling seemed so soulless to him. Jazz was music made on real instruments, made by people who had liked to explore things and test boundaries.

Mikhail eased himself back against the wall of the sphere, surrounded by infinity and the music of John Coltrane, and lit an herbal stick. It was a good way to spend an evening. Maybe he might actually calm down.

Tap. Tap. Tap. Tap.

That wasn't Coltrane.That was someone banging the inspection hatch.

Mikhail opened it up. It was that weird man who had saved the ship when he was a kid.

`Doctor?'

`Hello Mikhail.Your parents told me you were up here:

The Peripshere is fully extended. You climbed up half a kilometre?'

The Doctor eased himself into the Perisphere. '**I** needed the exercise: He looked around. 'Nice view'

`Most of my friends haven't clued in. They still think the Perisphere is for making out.As if there aren't cameras in the sensor nodes: The Doctor nodded sagely and, to Mikhail's annoyance, sat cross-legged opposite him. Mikhail hated having his privacy invaded like this; he got so little of it on this crate.

The Doctor cocked an ear to what was playing on the EtherBox. 'John Coltrane?'

Mikhail nodded. *'My Favourite Things:*

`You know, I once told Coltrane the way he improvised was like he was 40

dismantling time itself and then putting it back together; he said wistfully.

Mikhail offered him a puff of his herbal stick.

The Doctor demurred. 'I thought you said there were cameras in the sensor nodes.'

`Yeah. I've been up here to make out with my girlfriend too. It doesn't take much to jury-rig a feedback loop.'

Mikhail took a drag on his herbal stick, hoping if he stayed silent the Doctor would take a hint.

`Your parents said you'd been thinking of leaving.'

Mikhail stubbed out his herbal stick in frustration. Jeezus . Are they going to tell everyone? That's always the way it is on this can of sardines.

Everyone knows everyone else's business.'

`Well, are you?'

Mikhail sighed. 'I don't know. I've only got a week or so to decide, though. Then we're out of range from Cestus Five.

That's the point of no return?'

Mikhail nodded. My Dad always made it sound so exciting: "We'll never make it to Galaxy Eight, but our children's children and grandchildren will... This ship will be the cradle of the future of humanity"All that crap.

But it's so boring here. No real sunlight. No real gravity.'

There was a brief pause and then a thin smile crossed the Doctor's lips.

`Your girlfriend is staying, though, isn't she?'

Mikhail's jaw dropped. 'How did you know?'

`Mikhail, you may like centuries-old music, but you're eighteen years old. What's her name?'

`Mariana. She's totally into this "cradle of the future of humanity" shit.

Ànd you're not?'

`Well, I might be too, but there's nothing for me to do here.

The Doctor looked lost in thought. Coltrane continued his soprano saxophone solo.

Finally Mikhail asked, 'What do you think I should do?'

The Doctor looked away from him. 'I don't... I don't know how much **I can** help you.

`You must have some kind of an opinion'

`Well, what are you good at?'

Nothing.That's the problem'

Ì wouldn't call jury-rigging sensor nodes "nothing": That's just hacking around. It's not like I could join the Engineering Corps'

`Why couldn't you?'

`For one thing, I don't know the first thing about a relational system the **size** of this ship'

`You understand jazz?'

`Well, kind of.'

41

Ùnderstanding the ship's systems and the way it works is not much different than understanding the harmonic structures in jazz. Bigger, but not much different:

The sound of hydraulics kicked in. The Perisphere was being lowered back onto the ship.

`Looks like my hour is up: Mikhail got up and started looking for his stray KDs.

The Doctor gently grabbed his arm.

`Mikhail, there's... there's something I need to tell you. Something you should know'

The view of space was now obscured by the oncoming architecture of the ship. Mikhail waited for the Doctor to speak.

`Yes?'

The Doctor looked as though the words he wanted were far from him, and moving even further away.

`Mikhail...'

The perisphere reconnected with the observation deck with a metallic crash.

Ìt's... it's nothing.'

1.

Mikhail had lost his balloon.

He cried as it drifted away from him, soaring toward the top of the Recreation Dome, an orphan of colour on a remorseless grey ceiling.

Gone. Gone. Gone. Never to come back.

Mikhail wanted his balloon back.

He wailed with all his heart.

`Hello, old friend,' a man said to him, tousling Mikhail's hair.

The man was dressed in funny clothes. He wore an old velvet coat that was green like the empty bottles at Granpa's cabin.

The man untied a balloon from a nearby chair, kneeled down and gave it to Mikhail. 'We can't have you crying now, can we"

Mikhail looked at the new balloon and suddenly felt better.

He realised who the man was. He had seen him on the viddy with Papa.

He was the Doctor. The man who saved the ship from the space privateers. The man they were holding the party for, with all the cake and balloons.

Mikhail looked at him up close. He had a long face, like the face of the moon in his storybook, and long brown hair like his Mama.

`You have long hair like a girl,' Mikhail said.

`Boys can have long hair too, Mikhail,' the Doctor replied.

`How do you know my name?'

The Doctor looked away, like Mama did when she talked about her sister who went to Heaven.

Mikhail heard something both familiar and strange:Papa is playing his music' He pointed to Papa, who was in the distance blowing a trumpet with his friends in the band on the rotunda.

The Doctor listened intently. That's jazz. Louis Armstrong's *Potato Head Blues.'*

Mikhail giggled at the name of the song.

`What's so funny?'

`Potato heads aren't blue:

It is a silly name' The Doctor tried to smile. 'Blues are music you play when you're sad'

`But that's happy music Papa is playing:

`Sometimes you play happy music when you're sad, Mikhail'

Mikhail scrunched his face in confusion.

`Why do you do that?'

The Doctor looked at Mikhail for what seemed a very long time, his bottom lip holding in his top one. Mikhail thought in that moment he was sadder than anyone he had ever seen. But today was the Doctor's party.

Why would he be sad?

The Doctor hugged Mikhail. He heard the Doctor whisper something in his ear.

`Forgive me, please.'

Mikhail patted the Doctor's back as he felt the Doctor's shoulders gently shake.

He asked him, 'Would you like my balloon?'

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Monitor

Huw Wilkins

The Doctor awoke to bright lights and the smell of blood. Noise seemed to assail him from all sides, people shouting, the scream of metal on metal and a terrifying alarm siren.

`Get them on the couches,' someone called over the din.

`Can't move this one. He's bleeding badly' someone else yelled from farther away.

Hands gripped the Doctor under his arms and began pulling him upright.The view swung crazily in front of his eyes and then blurred

as an agonising jolt of pain cracked along his spine. He screamed.

Àcceleration in thirty,' a voice shouted by his head. Ìf you can't get that one out, leave him:

The Doctor croaked something unintelligible as he was manhandled.

`Don't worry, mate,' someone said into his ear. 'You're safe for now We just need to get the hell out of here before the Dragons find us.'

His unseen helper roughly threw the Doctor down onto a padded surface.The Doctor screamed again, the sound tailing off into a sob.

The tone of the alarm changed, leaping an octave higher and beginning to sound more frequently.

`That's ten,' came a shout. 'Everyone on the Yellow now: The Doctor dimly perceived a flurry of activity around him and felt the thud of bodies hitting a hard surface.

This is gonna hurt,' someone close enough to be heard over the noise muttered.

The alarm sounded two deafening pips and the weight of a thousand tons crushed the consciousness out of him in a burst of sparkling agony.

This time he awoke to silence. Slowly the Doctor opened his eyes and carefully looked around, ignoring, for now, the insistent ache in his head.

He was lying on a bed in a small steel room. On one side of him lay an unconscious man on another bed. He was hooked up to a pair of drips **and** a heart monitor. A tangle of hoses disappeared into his mouth, pulsing regularly with his breathing. On the other side was a desk covered with the contents of emergency medical kits scattered around the head and shoulders of a sleeping man.

Silently the Doctor eased himself into a sitting position, feeling every muscle in his body protest at the movement. He winced and gritted his teeth against the pain, but nothing seemed to be seriously wrong.

Something tugged at his arm and then a little box at the head of the bed began beeping loudly.The man sleeping at the desk started awake

with a small cry

'Oh,' he said, seeing the Doctor sitting up. 'You're awake: The Doctor nodded.The man stood, thumped something on the wall behind him to silence the alarm then edged around the desk and held out his hand.

Ìm Doctor Mclvor, ship's medical officer. How're you feeling?'

The Doctor stretched tentatively, then nodded. 'I'm all right, I think'

À fellow Scotsman, eh?' Mclvor said absently. He pulled a slim penlight from the breast pocket of his grey jumpsuit and shone it into the Doctor's eyes. 'Reactions are good.There wasn't any sign of a concussion:

`What happened?' the Doctor asked, gently but firmly pushing Mclvor's hands away from his face.

Mclvor looked away. 'I'm not sure I should...' he murmured. 'The captain will explain. I'll let him know you're awake:

He turned away abruptly and spoke quietly into an intercom panel mounted on his desk.A moment later a crackly voice snapped something that the Doctor couldn't quite catch.

Mclvor turned back to the Doctor. 'Someone will be down in a few minutes to escort you up to the officers' mess:

The Doctor nodded and winced as a jab of pain stabbed through his neck. 'We were attacked,' he asked, half rhetorically.

`Yes; Mclvor replied, not meeting the Doctor's eye.

`By this ship?'

Mclvor glanced back at him and nodded.

Ì see,' the Doctor said. 'How many survivors?'

Mclvor sighed and perched uneasily on the edge of his desk. 'Four, including you:

There were nine of us in that cargo pod,' the Doctor said, appalled.

`What happened to the rest?'

`Wreckage had punctured its hull and most of the atmosphere had

vented by the time we could get it on board and get life-support up to acceptable levels in the hold. Two died of asphyxia before we reached them; another two had either got caught up on something sharp or been hit by the shrapnel, and bled to death. The fifth just had too much lung damage. I couldn't save him:

Ànd the others?'

Mclvor passed a hand over his face, fingers rubbing noisily at the fine dusting of stubble on his chin. 'They'll live. The worst is Haines, the man next to you. Both his lungs collapsed and he lost a lot of blood, but I think he'll recover, we managed to get an IV line and blood expanders in quickly enough. The others, Adams and Lemiesz, are in a temporary medical bay one deck down.They're not so bad'

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The pressure door opposite the Doctor's bed slid back with a heavy thud, and a slim woman in a uniform matching McIvor's walked in. She snapped off a salute to the doctor, which he returned absently.

Ì'm here to escort you to the officers' mess,' she said, turning to the Doctor.

The Doctor cautiously eased himself off the bed and stood. His legs ached as if he'd been running but remained firm.

`Lead on; he said, then squinted at the woman's uniform, 'Lieutenant Barnes.'

She turned and led the Doctor through the door. Once they were through, she tugged the heavy metal plate back into place.A small green indicator lit up on the lintel, confirming a good seal.

They were left standing close together in a small wedge-shaped chamber with doors on opposite sides. The lieutenant edged past the Doctor and opened the door opposite the one through which they had entered.

`Sir, through here is the ship's main corridor. It's a zero-G environment.

Are you familiar with manoeuvring without gravity, or do you require assistance?'

Ì'll be fine, thank you,' the Doctor said, waving her on. She reached

through the open door and grabbed a sturdy steel handhold painted a bright luminous yellow. With practised ease she pulled herself through and pushed herself off, floating away to the far side of the shaft a few metres beyond.

The Doctor followed, feeling his internal organs lurch as the artificial gravity field fell away. The lieutenant smiled and pointed in the direction that had, a few moments ago, been upwards:Officers' mess is four decks up,' she said then launched herself gracefully with a casual kick. The Doctor watched her recede for a moment then pulled at his handhold and glided after her.

Every few metres the shaft was broken by doorways, leading to small landings surrounded with signs warning about the restoration of gravity.

The ship's crew compartment seemed to be laid out as a stack of short cylindrical decks, with the shaft linking them together through the centre.

When he reached the correct deck Barnes had already swung through the door and was standing on the yellow deck-plate, holding a hand out.

`The transition back can be a little disorienting, sir,' she said. `Make sure your feet are down first'

The Doctor took her offered hand, and gently swung feet-first through the opening. The gravity field gripped him suddenly and yanked him down. He almost stumbled for a moment, but the lieutenant held him upright.

`Thank you,' he said.

The lieutenant rapped smartly on the pressure door then slid it aside and ushered the Doctor in. As he stepped over the threshold, he saw a small room that curved around an arc that must have mirrored the hull of the starship. The walls mounted sturdy-looking shelves, and a couple of equally chunky tables dominated the middle of the room. Behind one of them a man in uniform was sitting.A steel pot of steaming coffee was in front of him on the tabletop, with three thick ceramic mugs lined up abreast of it.

`Dismissed, Lieutenant,' said the man, standing up.

`Sir; she said and saluted. She backed out of the compartment and closed the door.

The man regarded the Doctor for a long moment, then walked over and offered his hand. 'I'd say "welcome aboard", but it seems inappropriate after a tragedy like this,' he said in a grave voice.

The Doctor nodded silently, taking the man's hand briefly. He was perhaps an inch over six feet tall, and slimly built. His age could have been mistaken for as young as thirty, if it were not for the gentle greying of the hair at his temples and the network of fine wrinkles around his eyes.

Ì'm David Carey, captain of this ship; the man said:Please, have a seat.'

The Doctor walked the few feet to the table with the coffee and sat in one of the free chairs.The captain resumed his seat opposite.`Coffee?' he asked.

The Doctor nodded and watched in silence as Carey poured a mug for him and placed it back on the table.

' Which ship?' the Doctor asked.

Carey paused in the act of pouring a cup of coffee for himself and glanced up. 'They haven't...?' he began, then shook his head. 'You're on board the UES *Monitor*. She's a fast-attack destroyer, first fleet out of Proxima.'

`You're a long way from Proxima out here, Captain,' the Doctor said coldly `This system has been declared a demilitarised zone for the transit of humanitarian aid. Assuming we're still around Eta Cassiopeiae, of course'

`We are. For what it's worth, the Dragons broke that treaty first'

Ì wasn't aware they were attacking civilian aid carriers, Captain'

Carey met his gaze evenly. That was a mistake'

The Doctor raised his eyebrows. 'One that will cost you your command, if I have anything to say about it,' he said.

Ì...' the captain began, then shrugged and nodded:I intend to take full responsibility for this; he said. "The situation at the moment is difficult though:

`How so?'

`You know about the battle at EV Lacertae a month ago?'

The Doctor nodded. 'Right now there are over two thousand people busy freezing to death on the eighth planet. Their chances are much less now that my ship won't reach them'

Carey sighed. 'I know,' he said sadly. 'There's nothing I can do to help them'

`Call for help. Another ship could be here in maybe three weeks. We could still save most of them:

`That was the deepest incursion into our space the Dragons have made,'

the captain said, ignoring the Doctor. 'Those lizard scum destroyed the local defence squadron, two orbital colonies, and then nuked the capital from orbit. No warning, none. Forty-seven thousand civilians dead.

`We were one of the few ships close enough to respond, but even at maximum speed we caught only the crippled stragglers as they were leaving. We attacked and destroyed two light cruisers that were heavily damaged already and then we detected a heavy trying to sneak away along the radiation belts'

The Doctor set his cup down on the table, but said nothing.

`We moved in on it and made an attack pass' Carey paused for a momenta was the *Empire Covenant.* **Do you know of it?'**

The Doctor shook his head. Carey shrugged. 'It's a first-rate Draconian ship of the line. It carries the flag of admiral Shian-Kotek: The Doctor winced slightly at the man's mangling of the Draconian name. 'I've heard of him:

Ìt was seriously damaged, or it would have destroyed us.At best it could hold us off and run, which it did. It led us here and hid in this star's accretion disk. We followed...'

Ànd you expect me to believe you mistook a ninety-year-old cargo ship like the *Uluru* for the *Covenant,* Captain?' the Doctor

snapped, interrupting the officer.

Carey sighed. 'Yes. Both ships *mass* dose to a hundred thousand tons.

Monitor, well, she's not really a match for the *Covenant.* It has us **outgunned many times over. Our only chance is a fast, devastating sneak attack. It doesn't leave much time for careful observation'**

`Devastating indeed.'

'I understand how you must feel, Doctor, but I have to ask you to put that aside, at least for a while. We can't disengage and return to Earth, so you and the other survivors will have to wait for your day in court'

`Why not?' the Doctor asked in surprise. 'We're no more than twenty days from Earth, probably much less for this ship!

Ìt's not distance that's the problem. We and the *Covenant* **have backed each other into a corner. Neither of us can leave the system without rising above the accretion disk.As soon as one does that, the other has a massive** 49

tactical advantage, and could probably destroy it before it manages to leap out.'

Ì thought you said the *Covenant* was crippled?'

Ìt was, but we've been hunting them through all this dust and rock for close to a month now They could have repaired a lot of damage in that time. If I were Shian-Kotek I'd have given priority to the close-in weapons systems and the long-range missiles. As soon as they know even our rough location, they could flood the area with hunter drones.They carry megaton-class nuclear warheads, Doctor, and we can't match that kind of firepower.'

The Doctor rubbed his chin. 'And I assume they can't get away for similar reasons?'

Carey nodded. 'The *Covenant* can barely accelerate at three gravities when it's not damaged; this ship can hit nearly twelve at flank. We could run them down under the range of their nukes and cut them to pieces before they get away.'

`What about calling for help?'

`Same problem, more or less. Unless we climb out of the accretion disk we'd need to use a powerful transmission, and we'd still get hardly any bandwidth. If we stay just inside and keep the cover that means, even for a minimum message, a transmission time of about eighteen minutes. The *Covenant's* drones can pull over two hundred G.We only just managed to get away after rescuing your crew.'

`The *Covenant* fired on you?'

`Yes.We mined the area as we left. Less than two hours after we burned out, we detected detonations around the wreckage. We can't be sure what the mines were attacking, but the best bet would be long-range hunters.

If we'd been slower to get away, or if we'd been using our drive enough for them to detect us when they arrived, then we'd be dead as well.'

`Two hours: the Doctor pondered. They're close. Maybe a third of an AU

away.'

Carey nodded. `That's right at the edge of what our simulations predict is the maximum radius they could have covered without being detected.

They're not designed for stealth so much as we are. If they try to move fast we'll see them'

`Shian-Kotek's no fool,' the Doctor said, pronouncing the name correctly with the characteristic clipped Draconian vowel sounds. 'He could be closer than that. He may have delayed the launch of the drones: The captain raised an eyebrow Ì suspect he's very much closer. I'd want to keep the time-to-target on my weapons down to less than thirty minutes. We can't escape their detection radius in that time. He's just not ready to make a fight of it yet: He paused for a moment, lost in thought.

`You speak Draconian?' he asked suddenly.

The Doctor nodded. 'I know a little. I spent some time in the Empire 50

before the war. I was little more than a tourist though. It can come in handy on these aid ships if someone can negotiate a

little with them'

`You've been close to the frontier, then?'

The Doctor nodded:I helped evacuate Rho Coronae'

Carey shook his head. 'I was on the *Jamestown* when she was shot down around Rho: He sighed. 'We're fighting for our lives here, Doctor. If they can strike at EV Lacertae then it's a matter of months before they can close on Earth. We have to make sure that Kotek doesn't think he can do that with impunity'

The Doctor looked up from where he lay on an acceleration couch as the door to the small compartment opened. lieutenant Barnes came in leading a burly man behind her

`Hello again, Lieutenant, the Doctor said, raising one hand to tip his hat before remembering it had been lost in the wreckage of the cargo ship.

`Hello, sir,' she said in a businesslike manner, helping the other man through the door.

Àh, Captain Adams,' the Doctor said, recognising the man as he came through the door. The Doctor stood and helped Barnes shepherd the man down onto another couch. 'I'm glad to see you're feeling better: Adams held up one bandaged hand. 'I've been worse, he said gruffly

`Doctor Mclvor says Crewman Lemiesz is making good progress and should be fit enough to be released in a few days, but I'm afraid Crewman Haines still needs attention and can't leave the medical bay for a while'

She turned to go, slipping through the small hatchway with a practised shimmy.

"Thank you, Lieutenant: the Doctor called after her.

Adams looked up at the Doctor. `How're you feeling? You look better off than the rest of us:

Ì'm fine. I was lucky enough not to get hit by any of the shrapnel that went through our pod, and it's not the first time I've had a quick taste of vacuum:

`Jesus, what a mess,' the captain said in a low growl. He ran his hands over his closely cropped hair. 'Ten of my crew dead, and all they can do is apologise like they spilled my drink: He scowled angrily 'I should never have listened to you'

The Doctor looked away, unable to meet the captain's eye. 'We're committed to saving lives, Captain, not taking sides:

`Well, the bottom line on that balance sheet's not looking too good right now, is it, Doctor?'

The Doctor turned his gaze back to Adams and held it silently for a long, long moment. 'That was unworthy of you, Captain, he said quietly 'I believed you to be a man of principle:

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This time it was Adams's turn to look away, abashed. 'Yes: he said. 'I'm sorry'

`You know how important our mission here was, what was at stake'

The captain sighed:And a fine job we made of it,' he said wearily.

The Doctor nodded. 'Have you spoken to the captain?'

Adams shook his head. 'No, I saw the X0. Some awful little career lifer called Tate. Dreadful frizzy hair' he said, waving his hands either side of his head.

`Did you...?'

'No,'Adams snapped, interrupting the Doctor, 'of course not.This crew's twitchy enough to blow away an unarmed freighter thinking it's a Dragon ship of the line. I didn't think mentioning we're here to meet it would go down too well'

`They think we were just transiting the system?'

`Yeah:

`Good,' the Doctor said, nodding:Let's keep it that way?

'We...'Adams began, but was interrupted by a knock on the door. The Doctor raised an eyebrow at the captain and reached over to tug the door open. Lieutenant Barnes was there again, a bundle of silvery objects tucked under one arm.

`Captain, Doctor' she said by way of greeting. Captain Carey's arranged for this berth to be set aside for you and the other survivors: She dumped the bundle of objects onto a vacant couch. 'I've brought

you down some blankets and rations. I also need to go through the combat action drill with you.'

The Doctor pulled a foil-wrapped ration pack off the pile and looked at it apprehensively. The front was covered in tear-off panels, and the back was a mass of closely printed instructions.

`Sorry, but it's the best we have at the moment,' Barnes said apologetically. `We're down to the MREs now, no fresh food left. I managed to get you some of the brown and reds though'

`Brown and red?'Adams asked.

`Well, it claims to be beef stew and cherry pie. Doesn't taste like either, but at least they're better than the orange and greens:

Àh; said the Doctor as if this explained it all. `This ship must have been out of port for a long time to have just the emergency rations left.'

Barnes nodded `We put out from Proxima nearly eighteen months ago. We were supposed to rotate out for another crew after six months but we were called on a sixty light-year sprint to reinforce the fleet at Fifty-one Pegasi.We had to provide cover for the retreat from Zeta-T when the *Connestoga* was shot down and the line broke.Then the Dragons attacked EV Lacertae, and now this:' She shook her head and sighed:We're the fleet fire brigade, and they seem to need us more and more.We've been dashing from crisis to crisis non-stop: 52

Èighteen months in this can; Adams said with a shake of his head.

`Jesus. I'd go stir crazy'

`We're a professional crew, Captain,' she replied, a slight sharpness in her tone.

Ì'm sure Captain Adams didn't mean to suggest you were anything but, lieutenant; the Doctor said smoothly, catching Adams's eye as he did so.

`No, no, of course not; Adams said placatingly.

`Sorry' Barnes said. She looked away for a moment and leant on the doorframe:It has been tough; she confessed quietly:To tell you the truth nearly half the crew is on a charge for something or other. Mostly for fighting.Arguments get out of hand when you can't get

away from people'

The Doctor nodded and fiddled with the food pack he was holding. He turned it over, scanned the instructions for a moment then gave up and began biting at the corner of the wrapper.

Ilene; said Barnes, holding out a hand. She took the meal packet and deftly twisted it back and forth then pressed hard with her thumbs in two small depressions on the top. 'It'll heat itself now When the top pops open, it's ready.'

The Doctor took the already warm packet back from the lieutenant and put it down on his couch. He crossed his legs on the padding and watched it intently, chin resting on his hands:Forgive me, lieutenant; he said after a moment. 'Please, join us for dinner. You can go through your drill with us at the same time:

Barnes glanced at the door, then said, `Yeah, okay: She took one of the brown and reds, set it heating and tossed it to Adams then took one for herself

`So, tell me about this combat action drill; the Doctor said, still watching his dinner cook:It all sounds terribly exciting:

Adams rolled his eyes and started to sigh but stopped himself as he caught Barnes looking at him. He turned his gaze to the meal packet like **the** Doctor and said nothing.

Ìt's pretty simple, the lieutenant said. 'Right now the ship's in cruise mode. We've got the artificial gravity and acceleration dampers working.

Well, except in the central corridor, never any G in there. When we go into combat all the power for those systems goes into the drive and weapons, **so** no internal gravity and no dampers:

`Christ; Adams said quietly. That's insane:

Ìt's not comfortable,' Barnes replied, 'but you get used to it:

`Captain Carey told me this ship can accelerate at twelve gravities, Lieutenant. That's more than uncomfortable:

`You get enough warning to get to an acceleration couch.'

'And if there isn't one handy?'Adams asked.

Barnes scuffed the dirty lemon carpet with the heel of her shoe. Every
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compartment has one bulkhead colour-coded yellow. Get your back against that when the alarm sounds and you'll be okay.'

Adams opened his mouth to say something, but the sudden crack of the Doctor's meal popping open interrupted him.

The Doctor looked down at the two compartments of brown and red goo arranged around a plastic spork that the opening had revealed.

Tentatively the Doctor tasted some of the stew. He grimaced slightly at the taste:Better than the orange and green, you say?'

Barnes nodded. The Doctor shared a baleful glance with Adams as the captain's meal pack popped open. 'Eat up,' he said.

Adams tried a spoonful of the stew and shrugged. "That's not bad; he said.

The Doctor ate about half of the stew while watching Barnes and Adams demolish their own meals in silence. When the captain was finished he glanced at the Doctor's half-eaten ration.

Àre... ?' he said but stopped short as the Doctor silently handed the plastic package over.

`How much longer are we likely to be out here?' the Doctor asked, addressing Barnes.

She shrugged expressively 'I don't know. We have enough food for maybe six more months; that's the only thing that really limits us:

`You mean we could be stuck out here for half a year before getting back to Earth?' Adams asked, a spoonful of cherry mush halfway to his mouth.

Barnes nodded.

"These men have families, lieutenant,' the Doctor said:And the relatives of the dead need to be informed:

Ì understand that; she said sympathetically 'I'm sure the captain has explained our position though:

Adams shook his head:This is a fast ship. I don't buy that it couldn't

get away from the *Covenant.'*

Ìt's the captain's assessment that the risk is too great,' Barnes said in a guarded voice. 'If the *Covenant* has regained its nuclear capability then there's a good chance we'd be toast before we could get out of the system:

ll'Adams replied, stressing the word.

`Bet your life that they haven't?' Barnes asked with a shrug.

`Faced with the prospect of six months on this windowless can, then maybe. Surely someone must've tried to change the captain's mind?'

The Doctor raised a hand. "This isn't going to get us anywhere.

lieutenant, do you think the captain would speak to me again?'

Ì'm sure he would, but I can't guarantee when he'd be able to fit an appointment in; he's a busy man:

'Then would you be so kind as to ask him to set aside a little time for me at his earliest convenience?'

'What good do you think talking to him is going to do?' asked Adams sceptically.'All he's got waiting for him back on Earth is a court martial now: The Doctor sighed. 'Unless you want to spend those six months stuck here with your family believing you're dead, then I think persuading the captain to leave sooner rather than later is our best option:

'I'll ask him, Doctor, but like I said, no guarantees.' The lieutenant gathered up the empty meal packets and opened the compartment door.

'I'd just try to get some rest for now.'

'Thank you, lieutenant,' the Doctor called after her as the door closed.

Most of the senior crew, twelve people all told, had turned out for the funeral. They had taken the time to change into their best uniforms, even though this generally meant their one jumpsuit that wasn't torn or stained. Space was limited in the ship's small morgue, and made awkward by thick bundles of cables that looped across the ceiling and the snarls of pipe-work that covered the walls, so the congregation

jostled uncomfortably shoulder-to-shoulder as Carey read aloud from the Bible.

When he was done, the captain snapped the heavy book closed and crossed himself Most of the rest of the crew copied the gesture as best they could in the confined space.

Carey slipped the slim black and white *Miles Christi* epitrachelion from his shoulders and turned to the survivors of the *Uluru.* Crewman Lemiesz stood supported between the Doctor and Adams, breathing with artificial care through a respirator mask attached to a small oxygen tank.

`Would you like to say a few words, Captain?' Carey asked.

Adams nodded and carefully eased Lemiesz's weight over to the Doctor.

Carey reached out to help but lieutenant Barnes moved more quickly and shouldered part of the load.

Adams stepped forward and looked down at the indistinct body-bagged shape lying on the open refrigerator drawer. He remained silent for a short while, then turned to face the crew. He looked from face to face, finally settling on Carey. He began to say something but hesitated and looked away at the Doctor.

The Doctor, almost imperceptibly, shook his head.Adams nodded slowly then glanced down at his feet and sighed.

'He was a good man,' the captain said quietly. He lifted his head and looked into Carey's eyes.'He was a good man, he said again in a tired, tired voice. 'He deserved better:

Adams returned to his position in silence, taking back the burden of supporting the wheezing Lemiesz from Barnes. The Doctor carefully transferred his own load to the lieutenant, reached out and gently took 55

the bible from Carey's hands. He walked over to the corpse and turned to face the crew. His fingers flicked through the thin pages of the book for a few moments, pausing here and there, until he found what he wanted and opened it fully.

Ì am the good shepherd: he said, enunciating clearly and loudly as if speaking to a much bigger crowd, ànd know my sheep, and am known

of mine. As the Father knoweth me, even so know I the Father. and I lay down my life for the sheep'

He looked up from the book and fixed his eyes on Carey. 'And other sheep I have, which are not of this fold: them also I must bring, and they shall hear my voice; and there shall be one fold, and one shepherd'

He stood silent for a moment, then handed the Bible back to the *Monitor's captain,* still open at the book of John. He walked back to Adams and Lemiesz and relieved Barnes of the crewman's weight.

Carey stepped forward again, donning the *Miles Christi* stole once more.

`Blessed be the name of the Lord,' he said, head bowed, 'now and forever. May almighty God bless you, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Go to love and serve the Lord.Amen:

The officers muttered the response unevenly and began to filter out from the back of the room.

McIvor eased his way through the small crowd and looked concernedly at Lemiesz.Ì'd better get him back to the sickbay as soon as possible,' he said.

I'm okay, really' Lemiesz murmured, his voice made hollow by the mask.

Just for a day or two more, until I'm sure you don't need oxygen any more.Your lungs are healing well, but I don't want to take any risks:

`Better go, Lem,'Adams said. `Rest up. It's not any more fun outside of the sickbay, you know'

Lemiesz nodded wearily and let the doctor help him away.

`That's it, then,' Adams said quietly to the Doctor as he watched Carey sliding the drawer closed.

The Doctor shook his head. `No, not yet,' he replied in a low voice. He patted Adam's shoulder absently and walked over to Carey.

The captain was carefully folding the long silk stole into a tight bundle.

`Doctor, he said curtly, glancing sideways as the Doctor

approached.'What can I do for you?'

Ì was hoping you'd managed to find some time to speak with me again'

Carey sighed and turned to face the Doctor. 'Is there anything more to be said?'

Ì think there is, Captain:

Carey's eyes searched the Doctor's face for a long moment before he turned away and resumed his careful folding of the stole. Ì disagree!

The Doctor grabbed Carey's arm above the elbow. 'You can't just 56

pretend all this never happened, Captain. Eleven people are dead because of your mistake.You just read the service at one of their funerals.The least you owe us is some of your time'

The captain let out a long hissing breath through his teeth. 'Very well then. Eighteen hundred, day after tomorrow. Meet me in the officers' mess when I come off bridge rotation:

"thank you, Captain; the Doctor said sincerely.

The officer turned and walked away in silence.

Ì overheard some of that,'Adams said, walking over to the Doctor as he watched the captain leave. 'Like getting blood out of a stone'

Ì think we're just the most visible of a million problems on his plate right now:

Close to the watch changeover the officers' mess was more crowded than the last time the Doctor had seen it. Nine uniformed men and women, nearly a fifth of the crew, were busily eating their meals and drinking coffee and tea. Teabags, the Doctor noted, were carefully squeezed and hung to dry over an air vent, even though most of them looked to be on their last legs. Coffee was carefully portioned, a scoop at a time, into ragged filters and fixed into the percolators.

The Doctor took a vacant corner seat at one of the larger tables. For the most part the crew ignored him, but he noticed more than one curious glance thrown his way.

'Doctor?' someone said behind him. He turned around and saw a tall woman dressed in a bridge-crew G-suit - a bulky garment of ballistic

Kevlar covered with light plastic armour, that could inflate to squeeze blood into the wearer's brain to keep them conscious while the ship was accelerating. Around the neck was a thick seal that matched the heavy helmet she carried under one arm. For now though her thick hair fanned **out** around her head in a brittle blonde nimbus.

The Doctor stood and offered his hand:Commander Tate?'

`That's right,' she said, flashing a brief, insincere smile. She took his hand clumsily in the thick gauntlet she wore and shook it once, then sat down **in** a chair opposite him, her suit creaking as she moved. She placed her helmet carefully on the table between them.

Ì'm on watch in a minute, but I wanted to take a moment to offer my condolences:

`Thank you, Commander,' the Doctor said.

È. that is to say we...' she said, stumbling clumsily over the words. She paused for a moment and took a deep breath. 'I'm so sorry,' she murmured.

`You...' began the Doctor but two curt pips sounded over the ship's intercom and interrupted him.

Ì have to go,'Tate said, standing:The captain will be with you in a few minutes.'

The Doctor watched her walk out of the room, followed by the other armoured members of the bridge crew and more conventionally uniformed soldiers.

For a minute or two the mess was empty and the Doctor took advantage of the respite to gather a pot of coffee and two cups. Gradually other members of the crew began to filter in, most just grabbing a drink and mealpack before sitting down in silence at a table. A few low conversations broke out here and there.

Before long the hatch opened and the departing bridge crew came in.

Captain Carey brought up the rear, his G-suit open down the central seam to reveal a pale blue cotton tee-shirt. It was damp with sweat and clung to his chest in large, dark patches. He ignored the Doctor at first and, like the other armoured crewmen, spent several minutes

downing cup after cup of water from the cooler.

The Doctor sipped his coffee patiently as he waited for the officer to come over. Finally he did so, collapsing into the seat and setting his helmet down with a crash. He poured himself a cup of coffee without ceremony.

`Doctor McIvor tells me he's ready to release crewman Lemiesz from the bay,' the captain said.

`He has already. I saw him briefly before coming up here'

`How is he?'

`His breathing's a bit rough still after the vacuum exposure, but he's not too bad, all things considered'

The captain sniffed and took a gulp of coffee:Good; he said:What was it you wanted to see me about?'

Ì wanted to ask you again to consider leaving this system, on behalf of myself and the other survivors'

Ì thought that might be it.' He rolled his head from side to side, stretching the muscles in his neck:I'm still not willing to risk taking the ship out of the cover of the accretion disk'

`You realise that this delay might count against you in a court martial?'

Ì'm aware of that, Doctor: the captain said, the faintest trace of anger modulating his voice. 'It's not a decision I made lightly, or without good reason. I won't risk the ship to lighten my sentence'

The Doctor sat back in his chair and looked at the captain over the rim of his coffee mug.

Are we done here?' Carey asked.

`Who was in command of the ship when you attacked us?' the Doctor asked, eyebrows raised disingenuously

Ìt was my responsibility,' the captain snapped.

`Yes, ultimately, but who actually gave the order?'

Carey stood and favoured the Doctor with a fleeting smile. 'Does it matter? It was done under my authority and I have to bear the consequences:

`Well said,' the Doctor said dryly, but the captain was already walking away.

Adams patted Lemiesz on the back as the man coughed and spat into a beaker.

`Christ,' Lemiesz said croakily 'Feels like my lungs are on fire'

`There's more painkillers if you need them,' Adams said, turning to rummage amongst the small pile of pills McIvor had left behind.

`No, no, I'll be okay' Lemiesz straightened up and looked at his face in the mirror. He wiped the sweat away and ran his fingers over the livid vacuum lesions that crossed his broad Slavic features.

'Look on the bright side. You're a whole lot prettier now, Lem,' Adams said with forced joviality.

Lemiesz gave him the finger as he sat down on one of the couches.

Adams glanced over at the beaker, making sure there were no signs of blood as Doctor McIvor had instructed.

`So we're stuck here then, Captain?'

Adams shrugged. Unless the Doctor can persuade the captain to leave'

Any chance, you think?'

'I don't think so. He's a good negotiator, but I don't think he's that good'

`Damn,' Lemiesz said, his weak voice barely carrying across the room.

`Dana's going to think I'm dead:

Adams nodded:For a while, Lem. Just for a while. She'll be okay'

`Yeah, I guess. She comes from a big family'

A sudden knock at the door made Lemiesz jump and he began coughing again.Adams dithered for a moment between helping his friend and opening the door, then put his arm around Lemiesz's

shoulder and helped him sit up. The knock sounded again.

`Come in,'Adams shouted, not sure if the person on the other side could hear him.

The door slid aside revealing a middle-aged man, well muscled and clearly very fit for his years. He entered the compartment with a deft twist to fit his broad shoulders though the hatchway.

Lemiesz spat copiously into the beaker and raised one hand in a mordant greeting.

`Sorry,' said the man, standing awkwardly in the doorway and running his hands though his thick mop of black hair. 'I hope I didn't cause any problems there'

Ìt's okay,' Adams said, patting Lemiesz on the back. `His lungs are just a bit rough.'

Ì'm Avery DeSoto, Ship's Master.'

Adams held out a hand, which DeSoto took. 'Ken Adams, ex-captain of the *Uluru:*

tem,' Lemiesz said wearily. DeSoto nodded in greeting.

`What can we do for you, Mr DeSoto?'Adams asked.

DeSoto dosed the compartment door and perched himself on the edge of one of the couches. 'I've been talking with Lieutenant Barnes, he said.

His gaze flicked back and forth for a moment between Lemiesz andAdams then the big man rubbed his chin thoughtfully 'How would you like a quick tour of the ship?'

Ì don't know... 'Adams began, glancing back at Lemiesz.

'I'm okay, really Anything's better than sitting in this little tin box,' Lem said.

`Follow me then.' DeSoto waved them through the hatchway and helped the two men into the zero-G shaft. He gently manoeuvred Adams out of the path of another crewman who was gliding past. She nodded to the master and then was gone, flying silently away.

`Down, for now, he said, pointing towards the back of the ship. 'Follow me' He pivoted effortlessly and flicked himself away with a twist of his wrist. Lemiesz and Adams followed with rather less grace, occasionally bouncing carelessly off the steel walls.

When they caught up with DeSoto he was already standing inside the hatch of a narrow compartment. He grabbed Lemiesz's jumpsuit as he overshot and hauled him back and onto the floor. Adams managed to arrive with a little more dignity, carefully dropping himself to the deck as he slid into the artificial gravity field.

'It's a little cramped down here I'm afraid, gentlemen,' DeSoto said as he led the way through a narrow pressure door, 'but what's at the other end is worth the effort'

Lemiesz raised an eyebrow at Adams, who shrugged and followed DeSoto into the dimly lit compartment beyond. Ahead of him the petty officer was already at the far end of the bay, almost hidden from view by heavy racks of spares and a thick column of pipe-work that emerged from the floor like a gnarled banyan tree. 'Careful of those lines there, some of them are hot,' he called over his shoulder.

Adams and Lemiesz gave the pipes a wide berth as they edged their way through the maze to the chief. As they reached him he pushed open another door that opened onto a completely dark space .The light spilling past them gave just enough illumination to give the impression of complex machinery just out of reach.

Òkay,' DeSoto said. 'In you go. Carefully now, it reaches past the main hull so there's no gravity.'

Adams carefully stepped into the dark space and felt the lurch as gravity 60

disappeared. It felt disconcertingly like falling, and he had to fight the briefest moment of panic as his body convinced itself that he'd just dropped off a cliff. Lemiesz followed a moment later and then DeSoto was pushing both of them further in, as he expertly flipped himself around the door and pushed it closed. As the latch clicked home a series of dim red bulbs, set seemingly at random into the walls, flickered on.

`Where are we?' Lemiesz asked.

`Maintenance crawlspace for the starboard-rear Close-in Weapons System,' DeSoto replied.

Ànd that means?' Adams asked.

Ìt means it's a nice peaceful spot, and the only place on the ship with a window. Here: the master said and pushed himself off from the wall. He flew slowly across the small room and grabbed onto a handle by a small control panel. He tapped a few buttons and watched as a set of green indicators lit up. Ì'm going to have to kill the lights: The compartment was plunged into total darkness. Adams found the illusion of falling suddenly much stronger. He clung to the wall and concentrated on keeping *his* breathing calm. Next to him he heard Lemiesz begin to cough wetly, the sound startlingly loud in the confined space.

`You better swallow that, lad,' DeSoto said, invisible in the blackness.Ì'm not paid to clean this place as well as maintain it'

Adams turned towards the sound and caught a glimpse of the control panel again picked out in the faintest of green outlines. DeSoto's hand obscured it for a moment then there was a heavy mechanical sound that the captain felt through the wall as much as heard.At once a shaft of light entered the room, growing quickly from a thin sliver to a wide square panel as a hatch swung up and away to reveal a thick window.

`C'mere: DeSoto said, beckoning Adams and Lemiesz forwards. If you look from this angle you can get a good view:

Lemiesz glanced at Adams and made an exaggerated gesture for him to **go** first. Adams grinned back at him and carefully manoeuvred the few metres over to the glass.

More than half the view was dominated by the clustered barrels of what **was clearly, even centuries after its invention, a giant machine gun. It was surrounded by a maze of hydraulics, ammunition feed lines and sensor domes, but beyond them he could see out into space.**

`Not the most inspiring view in the galaxy,' DeSoto said from behind him.

Adams shook his head.The view was sparse, mostly the dead blackness of space, but here and there he could make out rocks and boulders lit in a fine, oblique crescent, slowly tumbling with an effortless, silent grace. Between them stretched great clouds of gas and dust teased by the capricious solar 61

winds into giant stacks and curlicues, here and there reflecting

the light of the star in a dazzling rainbow or fluorescing a cool yellow.

Àfter steel walls it's wonderful,' he said in a quiet voice. He turned to Lemiesz and reached out a hand. His crewman took it and Adams pulled him over then pushed himself away to give the other man room.

`Why's this the only place that has windows?' Adams asked.

`Windows let out heat, light, radiation. Stuff that could be detected.That, and they compromise the integrity of what little armour we have'

Ànd here?' Lemiesz said without turning away from the view.

Just a quirk of necessity. We need to be able to do visual inspections on the ammo feeds for these cannon, preferably without having to suit up and go outside. These little windows aren't much, but they sure beat a spacewalk in a firefight:

Lemiesz reached out a hand and placed his palm flat on the thick glass.

DeSoto drifted away a few feet then hooked his foot under a pipe and anchored himself with his back to the yellow rearward wall of the compartment.

`Do you have family back home?' the officer asked.

À fiancee; Lemiesz said quietly. DeSoto nodded and glanced at Adams.

The captain shrugged.

Ì'm divorced,' he said. 'One stepchild who came and left with my ex. I send a card on his birthday but that's about it'

DeSoto nodded. 'I've a wife and a kid back home,' he said. 'It's been a long trip'

`No sign of getting any shorter either; Adams muttered. And now we're stuck out here with you'

DeSoto remained silent for a long minute, lost in thought. He seemed to reach a decision with himself. 'Some of us think it's time we left, whether or not the captain agrees; he said quietly.

Lemiesz glanced over at Adams. 'Are you suggesting...?'

`Mutiny?' DeSoto shrugged. 'More or less. We don't want to set the officers adrift and embark on a life of piracy, but we do want to get the hell out of here and back to civilisation'

`That's a dangerous game,'Adams observed.

`Worth the risk, I think. We could be out here for six more months, and every day our chances of escaping get smaller.The captain's already given those Dragons a month to repair their ship. We should've cut our losses when we first came here'

`You never know. The Doctor might succeed in persuading him,'

Lemiesz suggested.

Ì doubt it,' DeSoto said. 'Most of the senior staff have tried persuading him. Commander Tate was probably the most vocal but...' He tailed off and looked away.

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'But?' Adams asked.

`Tate was commanding the ship when we shot you down, DeSoto said with a sigh.

`What? I assumed it was Carey?'

`No, the master said, shaking his head. 'In the end the responsibility's his, but Tate pulled the trigger. Now he's backing her decision all the way, and she's running around after him like a puppy'

DeSoto looked back and forth between Adams and Lemiesz. Adams shrugged and glanced at Lemiesz.

`Why come to us?' the crewman asked in a voice even more hoarse than before.

`Barnes and I were hoping Tate could sway the captain, but that's never going to happen now, so there's no point waiting around for someone to get wind of the plan.

`You lads have got no assigned duty station, and you don't have to bunk with the other men. With you, and maybe the Doctor as well, we can get three men whom nobody will notice leaving. Add that to

Barnes and me and we may have a chance to take the bridge.'

And then what?'

`Then we fly out of here, get back to Proxima and sort it all out there. I figure Barnes and I will do some prison time, but at least my family can come visit.You boys aren't part of the military, so they can't do much but be rude to you'

`What if the *Covenant is* out there?'Adams asked. He turned to look out of the small window again. 'What if it's closer than you think?'

DeSoto rocked his head from side to side. 'I've run the simulations. We cruise down to the edge of the accretion disk, then flip around and floor it back the other way. We break the cover of the thickest part of the disk on the other side after about two hundred and fifty seconds, going thirty kilometres a second.The drive will be fit to blow at that point, so we'll have to cut the burn to three G. Eighteen minutes later and we're clear to jump'

Èighteen minutes,' Adams mused. That's a long time to be a sitting duck:

DeSoto smiled grimly. 'I didn't say it was entirely free from risk, but I don't figure the *Covenant's* got a time-to-target of less than twenty-some minutes. Any closer than that and we'd see it. Nobody ever accused the Dragons of building small.'

Adams pressed the palms of his hands together, fingers just touching his lips and blew thoughtfully between them. 'How are you going to take the bridge?'

DeSoto reached up and behind himself, sliding one hand into a deep recess behind a curving box conduit. Hundreds of rounds of ammunition, each as long as Adams's forearm, were dimly visible through the open slats 63

in the metal sides. The master grunted and then withdrew his hand. He was holding two compact pistols.

`This ship carries four side arms. Two forward, two aft. I swiped the aft pair two days ago in case the captain beat me to it'

Ì'm not getting into a gunfight,' Lemiesz said hotly.

Adams shook his head. 'Nor am I. I'm not killing anyone to get home

sooner.'

`They're just as a last resort,' DeSoto said:The bridge crew could get the other two if they're quick, and what'd we do then if we were unarmed?'

Ì don't like it,' Lemiesz said, looking at Adams.The captain held his gaze on DeSoto.

Barnes and I will carry them,' the master said. 'You two just need to watch our backs:

Adams looked at Lemiesz and the two men stared at each other in silence for nearly a full minute.

`Your call, sir,' Lemiesz said quietly.

Filially the captain nodded. 'Okay then,' he whispered. 'When?'

Às soon as Barnes gets here. Commander Tate has the bridge at the moment and I think she's the one least likely to put up a fight against going home.The captain's just come off watch, so he'll probably be asleep before long. We'll collect the Doctor on the way if he'll come: The Doctor sat deep in thought for a few minutes, watching the captain drink more water and talk quietly with the rest of his bridge crew. He drank the last of his coffee then slammed the mug down onto the table with a crash.All eyes in the mess turned to him as he slowly rose from his seat. He walked over to the captain's table.

`You won't leave here until you've found the *Covenant,* will you?' he asked rhetorically.

Carey shook his head. 'Our standing orders are to prosecute any and all targets, and the *Covenant* is one hell of a target: Èven at *the* expense of driving your crew right to the edge of breakdown?'

`They're professional soldiers, Doctor. I wouldn't expect a civilian to understand'

`You attacked a civilian ship.That is not the work of a professional crew, Captain,' the Doctor snapped angrily. One of the other bridge officers rose from his seat with an ominous creak of armour, but Carey held the man back.

`That was a tragic accident, Doctor,' the captain said through gritted teeth. 'Nobody here's proud of it, but that kind of thing happens in a

war: The Doctor stared down at the seated officer. ÀAnd when this crew tears itself apart? Will that be another tragic accident?'

Ì'm prepared for that eventuality,' Carey said evenly:I will not have this ship fail its mission to protect the Earth colonies'

`You're not protecting anybody out here. There's nobody here to protect:

Ì disagree, Doctor,' the captain said, his voice still placid and calm.

`When they bury Shian-Kotek's corpse on Iota Draconis Beta, then maybe they'll think twice about this war for the first time. And maybe it'll shake their arrogance a little, so they'll be a little less eager to murder our people next time'

The Doctor shook his head. 'You couldn't be more wrong, Captain: Ìs that so?' Carey replied, raising his eyebrows sceptically at his colleagues.

`Shian-Kotek is a nephew of the Emperor, a prince as well as an admiral.

He's well known, and a popular figure in the Empire. Kill him and every Draconian will be baying for human blood:

Carey flicked his eyes skywards:You should pay more attention to the news, Doctor.That's already happening:

`The Emperor doesn't want this warThe cost must be bleeding him dry, but if he's ever to back down and negotiate a cease-fire, he needs to be able to sway the senate. With Kotek's death he'd have no chance of that.

Kill him, and you'll be dooming Earth with absolute certainty'

Ìn your opinion, Doctor. Fleet strategy dearly thinks differently'

The Doctor threw his hands up in frustration:Nobody planned for this.Who would have guessed that the *Empire Covenant* would come so deep into human territory? We're outside your fleet's strategic models now, Captain:

`So, what would you have me do, Doctor? Run away and

probably get nuked in the process?'

`Contact the *Covenant.* Offer them the opportunity to disengage'

Carey chuckled and shook his head. 'We can't contact them, Doctor.

With all this dust and rubble in the way we'd have to be right on top of it to get a signal through'

The Doctor hesitated, glancing away for a moment and rubbing his chin. And if I told you where she was?' he asked, turning back suddenly.

`What?' the captain said, rising to his feet. 'How could you possibly know that?'

The *Covenant* has a hundred and eighty wounded on board, and most of her medical supplies burned. She's beyond the reach of any Draconian help out here, so she sent a tight-beam message to our aid organisation before she entered the accretion disk'

`You came here to *help* them?' Carey asked incredulously.The few other crewmembers in the mess began to mutter ominously.

`We came to render humanitarian aid. Medical supplies only. We have a duty to save lives:

`Human lives,' the captain snapped.

`Just lives,' the Doctor replied.

Carey stared at the Doctor for a dangerous moment. 'Where is it?' he asked in a low voice.

Ì'll tell you if you give me your word you'll offer disengagement and take the *Monitor* out of here:

"The only assurance I'll give you, Doctor, is my word that I won't have you tried for treason when we get back to Earth if you tell me where that ship is:

`Will you offer them disengagement?' the Doctor insisted.

`No way. I'll blow them to dust and drag Kotek's corpse through the

streets of New Coventry'

`Then I can't help you, Captain,' the Doctor said calmly.

Carey looked down at the table and took a deep breath. He turned to the man sitting next to him. 'Andrew, get onto tactical and analyse the course the *Uluru* was on when we intercepted it: He looked up at the Doctor. 'I'm willing to bet Adams wasn't ready to try manoeuvring that antique tub through the accretion disk very far:

The Doctor said nothing. Carey turned back to his officer:Project their course forward and look for any area with a bad sensor aspect within forty minutes time-to-target.'

Àye, sir,' the officer said. He turned away and began speaking into the comets unit built into the armour over his right forearm.

Carey gestured to two of the regular crew over the Doctor's shoulder.

`Wallace, Kranz, get this... man out of my sight.'

Two pairs of arms seized the Doctor and dragged him from the room.

Lemiesz eased himself back into the gravity field with exaggerated care then turned to help Adams with his landing. As soon as the captain was standing securely, he opened the door to their berth and stepped inside.

`Doctor?' he began to call but stopped short as he saw the scene inside.

The Doctor was backed up against the far wall, down on one knee with dark blood tricking from the corner of his mouth. Two crewmen stood over him, fists clenched and already turning to see who had entered.Operating purely on instinct,Adams dove forward and drove one of the men hard into the steel wall with his shoulder. The crewman shouted in pain as the air was expelled from his lungs.

Adams tried to stagger upright but was caught immediately by a vicious hooked blow from the other soldier. His vision blurred and his knees gave way, sending him crashing awkwardly to the yellow floor between two acceleration couches. Hands grappled at his clothes, trying to pull him upright, but he kicked out hard and felt bone crack alarmingly as his foot hammered down on the man's knee.

The officer began to scream but was cut off abruptly as DeSoto barged into the room and swung the butt of his pistol down onto the back of the man's neck. He crumpled bonelessly to the floor.

DeSoto raised the pistol and pointed it squarely at the face of the other crewman.

`That's quite enough from you, Mr Kranz,' he said conversationally.

The Doctor pushed out from behind the officer and reached down behind the acceleration couch to take the unconscious man's pulse.

`Damnation, man,' he said angrily, shooting a glare at Desoto. `Did you have to be so rough? You could have killed him.'

Adams levered himself to his feet and rubbed his jaw `No need to thank me,' he said weakly.

The Doctor pulled the unconscious officer into the recovery position and seemed satisfied that he was in no danger of dying, at least for the moment.

`What about him?' Lemiesz asked, indicating Kranz.

Desoto

aimed a kick at the small intercom unit on the wall. Plastic shattered and a brief rain of shredded electronic components fell to the ground. 'Lock them both in,' he said.

The Doctor and Adams squeezed past DeSoto and followed Lemiesz into the weightlessness of the central shaft. Barnes was floating a few metres aft, hanging on to a grip with one hand. She nodded curtly to them, her face taut.

DeSoto backed out of the compartment, still holding the gun level on Kranz's head. He slammed the door shut, slipped off one of his shoes and jammed the lever with it.'Old trick I learned in basic, he said to the others with a shrug. 'He won't be getting out of there in a hurry.'

The Doctor pushed against the wall and pirouetted with a light grace to face Adams. 'Captain: he said urgently. The course you set when we entered this system, was it a direct one to the *Covenant?'*

`What the... ?' Barnes began.

Adams stole a cautious glance at the officer, then nodded. 'Yes, more

or less. The *Uluru's* not exactly the most nimble ship ever built'

The Doctor slammed his fist into the wall and had to make an awkward grab for a handhold to stop himself from tumbling away. He took a deep breath and looked Adams in the eye. 'I've given them away then,' he said angrily 'Why didn't I *think?'*

Lemiesz opened his mouth to speak, but Barnes cut in before he could make a sound.

`You were coming here to aid the Dragons?' she asked in a tight voice.

Just whose side are you on?'

`Look, it's not that simple,' Adams said in a placatory tone, holding his hands up. He was suddenly very aware of the guns Barnes and DeSoto were holding, even though they were not pointed at him.

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`Make it simple: the lieutenant said slowly.

'We haven't got time for this,' the Doctor snapped. 'We've got to stop them from attacking the *Covenant:* He began to pull himself towards the prow of the ship.

Barnes levelled her gun at the Doctor's back. 'Nobody's going anywhere until I get an explanation: she stated. 'Master Chief, keep an eye on the other two.'

`Sir,' DeSoto said. He raised his gun and pointed it at Adams and Lemiesz, not quite aiming at either but keeping it close.

'I may have been planning a mutiny, but I'm no turncoat. I just want to see my husband, my family again,' the lieutenant said.

The Doctor spun slowly to face Barnes. 'If you don't help us you'll be condemning them to death,' he growled.

Barnes frowned and shifted her grip on the gun. Her aim wavered slightly but never left the Doctor even for a moment. 'Explain,' she said angrily.

The Doctor sighed. He rapidly repeated what he'd told Carey about the *Covenant.*

Ìs that true?' Barnes asked, glancing at Adams and Lemiesz when he

was finished.

Ìt is:Adams said. Ìf Kotek dies the Dragons will never back down from this war. You probably know as well as anyone that we're losing, and losing badly:

Barnes pursed her lips and frowned. 'I can't say I buy all that crap,' she said. 'But it looks like right now our aims coincide: She lowered her gun, DeSoto following her lead a moment later.

Are you sure?' he asked, looking at the lieutenant.

`No. I'm going to keep a real sharp eye on them, and so are you, Master Chief. One sign of treachery and you kill them:

Àye, sir,' the big petty-officer said uneasily.

The bridge is that way, gentlemen,' Barnes said, pointing up the shaft.

Ì'll ask you three to take the lead, please:

The Doctor, Lemiesz and Adams pushed off and began the journey to the ship's prow. A moment later DeSoto and Barnes followed, their weapons held cupped close to their bodies where they were less obvious.

Just short of twenty metres from the bridge door, two men stepped out onto the landing of the deck below it and peered down at the five people swimming towards them.

`Stop there,' one of them called. His companion hopped out into the shaft and swung himself onto the landing opposite. Both of them were wearing the armoured bridge G-suits.

`Keep going, Barnes whispered.

Ì said stop!' the first man shouted. 'I won't ask you again.'

`Keep going,' Barnes repeated. 'Get as close as you can.' She raised her voice and shouted up the shaft, 'What's wrong? We've been called to the bridge.

`You have not,' the second officer said. The captain's ordered the bridge sealed and guarded:

`Take the one on the left,' DeSoto murmured to Barnes. 'Check with him, he shouted back:He'll confirm we're to go in.'

`Not until you stop and back off,' came the yelled reply.

Just another few metres; Barnes whispered.

The two officers above them shared a momentary glance, then the one to the right drew a pistol from the back of his belt and pointed it down at the floating group:This is your last warning: he shouted.

`Gun!' Lemiesz said urgently DeSoto swore loudly.

`Get off the corridor: Barnes yelled.

Like a school of fish splitting around the approach of a predator, the group dived in all directions. Lemiesz clumsily crossed the gravity boundary near the ceiling of the deck and fell painfully to the floor. His shout of pain set off another racking spasm of coughing.

The soldier with the gun fired a shot in surprise at the sudden explosion of motion.The bullet missed its target and crashed noisily into the far bulkhead. The report was deafening in the confined space and the smell of cordite wafted down to where Adams was crouched.

`Lem! You all right?' the captain called.

`Yeah; came a reply from the deck above. Just...' but another fit of coughing cut the sentence off.

`Come out and surrender,' came a shout from above:We won't shoot if you surrender:

`Like last time?' Adams yelled into the shaft, anger getting the better of his fear for a moment.

That was an accident: came the reply.

`Christ, Anders!' DeSoto barked. 'Some damn accident. Who's that up there with you?'

'Luiz,' he replied.

`You'd better kill me before I get to you, you twitchy bastard, Luiz: shouted DeSoto.

Just come out calmly and we can sort this out,' the one called Luiz

called down to them.

`Yeah, right!' DeSoto shouted sarcastically. Adams caught a glimpse of something moving and was shocked by the concussion of another shot, closer this time.

`DeSotò

yelled Barnes. 'Cease fire!'

Before he could reply a pair of answering shots were fired, the bullets Impacting on the deck plating near his feet.

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`Stop this!' screamed the Doctor at the top of his voice. 'Have you lost your minds?'

`Yes: Luiz shouted. `This is insane, Barnes. Put down your weapons: Close to the prow, the hatch of the officers' mess opened and Commander Tate stepped out onto the landing.

`What the hell is going on here?' she bellowed.

`Keep back in cover, Commander,' Anders called to her. It's Barnes, DeSoto and the *Uluru* survivors. I think they're mutinying: Tate stuck her head out into the shaft. Ìs that right, Barnes?'

Barnes said nothing for a minute, then called back,`Yes.We just want to go home, Commander:

`Why isn't she on the bridge?' DeSoto said quietly

`Carey must have taken the conn; the Doctor replied, lifting his head slightly to look down at the chief on the deck below.

"This isn't the way to go about it, Lieutenant,' Tate shouted down the shaft.

`Didn't look like anything else was going to work, sir: DeSoto replied, leaning out into the shaft to make eye contact with the commander.

`Look..!Tate began to say but two shots drowned her out. One bullet gouged a long groove in the shaft wall. The other found its mark in DeSoto's shoulder.

DeSoto screamed and dropped his gun. It bounced once on the floor

then floated out into the weightlessness of the corridor, tumbling end over end in a pink cloud of the master's blood.

'Luiz! Anders! Stand down,' Tate was shouting. The Doctor, Adams and the others called to DeSoto, still afraid to break cover.

`He's okay,' Barnes called. She was the only one with a clear view of DeSoto's position. 'He's hurt, but okay:

`Yeah; DeSoto said weakly, clutching at the wound with his hand. 'Oh, God, does this hurt.'

I've had enough of this,' Tate snapped. She pushed herself out into the corridor and began quickly moving down towards the mutineers, flipping herself hand-over-hand along the grips on the wall. 'If you're going to shoot me, Lieutenant, feel free:

Before the commander had covered half the distance the urgent shriek of an alarm sounded, the shrill peals echoing off the bare steel walls.

Àll hands battle stations; said Carey's voice over the ship's intercom.

`Combat acceleration in fifteen seconds:

The lights flickered briefly as power began to be re-routed throughout the ship. The hull shook and vibrated, the sounds of distant machinery swinging into action transmitting themselves through the metal.

Èveryone on the Yellow; shouted Tate. 'We'll sort this out later. Barnes, get to DeSoto. Make sure he doesn't bleed out under the G'

The commander swung herself onto the nearest deck. The lieutenant darted across the corridor and dragged the master through the hatch and into the compartment beyond.

Tate!' the Doctor shouted over the siren. 'We can't let Carey destroy the *Covenant.'*

`Shut up; the commander replied, shouting through gritted teeth. Just get on the Yellow:

The alarm sounded two brief pips and the ship leapt forward, crushing them all to the deck..

Carey grunted under the strain of the acceleration.

`Keep the Phalanx in standby; he said, the microphone in his helmet relaying the order to the rest of the bridge crew. 'Prepare countermeasures:

`Coon, sensors,' said a voice in his ear. Target Dragon Alpha has engaged its drives. Accelerating at one point eight gravities. There's a big sodium spike in her drive spectrum. It's burning pretty dirty, sir: Àcknowledged; the captain replied.

Projected on the inside of his helmet Carey could see a luminous tactical display. The crimson glyph in the centre was the *Empire Covenant,* still crippled, unable to run and taken by surprise.A pale green sphere surrounded the big ship showing the area inside which it couldn't deploy its nuclear weapons without destroying itself in the blast. The streamlined yellow icon of the *Monitor* was already well inside it and accelerating hard.

`Conn, WEPO, sub-minute firing solution on Dragon Alpha; crackled another voice in his ear, breathless with the strain of resisting the crushing acceleration.

`Launch; Carey said. In front of him on the tactical display a sparkling cloud of red dots split off from the caricature of the *Monitor* and began streaking towards the *Covenant.*

`*Time* to target, forty-seven seconds. Reload cycle in fifteen; came the voice of the weapons officer again. Two small countdown timers appeared in the corner of Carey's vision, counting down the two periods.

`Vampire! Vampire! Launch signatures from Dragon Alpha,' shouted the sensors officer loudly enough that Carey could hear him even without the intercom. He winced slightly; this was Commander Tate's bridge crew, and he wasn't used to their reactions.

`Pitch down twenty; Carey ordered. Forward Phalanx to active.

The helm and weapons officers confirmed the order and the captain felt the ship lurch and shift under him, a new vibration adding to his discomfort as the giant Phalanx cannon spun up and activated their fire-control radar, scanning space for the incoming missiles.

The tactical display was becoming more complex by the second, as the two swarms of missiles passed each other and began homing in on

their targets.

`Time to impact, thirty-four seconds!

Another small countdown timer appeared in front of Carey's eyes. He watched the action unfold calmly The *Monitor's* missiles intersected the icon of the *Covenant,* a nimbus of small flicks and flashes denoting those destroyed by the Draconian ship's defences. Some got through though, less than he would have liked, but enough for a first salvo.

`rune to impact, fifteen seconds,' came the increasingly nervous voice of the sensors officer.

Carey waited until the countdown timer reached ten seconds.

`Pitch up one-twenty, burn two then cut drive and launch countermeasures. All Phalanx to active!

The ship lurched again and the terrible pressure lifted from his chest as the drive cut out. The G-suit released its stranglehold around his lower body with a hiss. On the tactical display he watched the *Monitor* dart upwards and go dim as its emissions reduced. Behind it trailed a string of inviting missile decoys.

`Helm, keep us oriented for optimum engagement by the Phalanx on that swarm'

`Helm, aye: came the reply.

The *Covenant's* missiles kept their straight track; they'd bought the dummy, and were homing on the decoys. As they passed below the ship the four Phalanx cannon raked them with radar-guided fire faster than the human eye could follow, and the light of a dozen explosions bathed the stealth-black hull. Carey could feel the vicious recoil from the anti-missile cannon shake the *Monitor* from end to end, and hammer at his spine.

`Conn, hold this course for twenty seconds, then pitch down one-eighty and increase flank for a pass across its stern'

As soon as the painful weight of acceleration was lifted, the Doctor eased himself off the hard floor with a groan. Around him he could hear the others moving and sighing with relief.

`Don't move!' shouted Tate from above them. `We could accelerate again any second. Keep your heads to the floor.'

Ignoring her advice, the Doctor pushed himself out into the corridor, grateful for the lack of gravity. He grabbed a grip with both hands and hurled himself towards the bridge.

`Doctor, no!' called Adams from behind him. 'You could fall the whole length of the shaft!'

The Doctor gritted his teeth and tried not to think about that possibility.

It was only a few seconds before he reached the deck where Tate 72

was floating with her back flat against the yellow floor. The deck was more open than most of the rest and was full of solid racks of bulky equipment spares. It would have been impossible to get the machine parts through the small pressure hatches, so the ship's designers had just left them out, leaving the deck an exposed ring around the corridor with the thick beams of the superstructure running through it floor to ceiling.

The commander was a few metres in, watching him out of the corner of her eye.

`You crazy...' she muttered as the Doctor swung himself out of the corridor and floated down towards the floor.

Ì need...' the Doctor said but before he could finish the ship accelerated again. He fell less than a foot to the deck plate, but landed hard enough to break his ribs and dislocate his shoulder. He screamed as the merciless gravity crushed him down on top of his injuries.

`Try to get onto your back,' Tate said, forcing the words out through gritted teeth. Her breathing sounded laboured.

No: the Doctor moaned. 'More... important...' He began to painfully crawl over to the woman. He coughed and a spray of dark blood dropped too rapidly to the deck. He wept from the pain as the broken bones grated inside his chest but kept going, inching his way along with his forehead dragging across the rough yellow carpet.

Finally he collapsed next to the commander and rested for a moment, each slow breath ending in a low whimper.

'I must speak with Carey,' he whispered. 'I have to stop this. Your commlink, Commander.'

Tate groaned with the effort but managed to lift her right hand and slide it across her body. Her fingers felt their way along the armour on her left forearm until they found the communicator patch. She pressed the button and held it in.

'MC-one,' she said hoarsely and the communicator beeped obediently

`Carey?' the Doctor whispered into the device. The ship's speakers relayed his voice over all the decks. 'Can you hear me?'

`Who the hell is this,' came a reply.The Doctor recognised Carey's voice despite the strain.

`The Doctor, Captain.You must stop this, you must let Kotek go.'

`Who let you on MC-one?'

`Me, Captain:Tate grunted.

`Tate? Jesus! I expected better of you Commander.'

`You must stop, Carey,' the Doctor said again.

`Goddamn it, no!' the captain shouted back. 'I will not let that godless lizard escape. He deserves to be hunted down like a wild animal for what he did at Lacertae:

`Yes, he's a butcher and a war criminal,' the Doctor said, blood dripping 73

from his lips onto Tate's hand and arm. 'But for the sake of humanity's future, you have to let him go.'

`Roll port sixty, pitch up seventy. Launch on a solution with less than sixty seconds time-to-target,' Carey's voice said.

The Doctor raised his voice to a shout even though the pain shooting through his chest was agonising. 'No, Carey! You must not! If you kill the Emperor's nephew they'll hunt you all down. They'll burn the Earth to ashes:

`Phalanx to standby, prepare countermeasures, the communicator relayed.

Sir, listen to him,'Tate said, straining against the pressure on her chest.

Òh, God, if you could just see him, David. He...'

`Shut up, Tate,' Carey snapped. 'He has to pay. Forty-seven thousand dead, Commander. Forty-seven *thousand.'*

'If you destroy the *Covenant* you'll be condemning twelve *billion* to burn, Captain: the Doctor shouted, then moaned as more blood dribbled from between his lips. Ìf you have one hope for humanity to survive this war you must disengage:

`This ship has a duty Doctor! A sacred duty that I won't disregard:

`Listen to him, David,' Tate shouted breathlessly. 'We're here to protect the Earth and colonies, we can't take the risk of condemning them all. I don't want any more blood on my hands'

'We can't just let him think he can get away with this!' Carey yelled, the volume of his voice distorting through the intercom speakers.

`He's learned that lesson, Captain: the Doctor said weakly. 'His ship's crippled and half his crew is dead or dying. Killing him will achieve nothing, only harden the Draconian' resolve:

`We're losing this war, you know we're losing it, David, Tate said, struggling to tilt her head towards the microphone. 'Our only hope is to negotiate a peace with them'

Ìt all comes down to you, Captain,' the Doctor said, his voice barely a whisper. He struggled to raise his head. 'Twelve billion. Live or die. Your choice'

`Conn, WEPO. Sub-minute firing solution on contact Dragon Alpha in eleven seconds'

Carey clenched his fists inside the heavy gauntlets. The tactical display projected inside his helmet seemed too bright all of a sudden, and he had to blink to clear the blurry image.

`Five seconds, sir,' said the weapons officer.

Òkay,' the captain whispered to himself. 'Safe weapons, roll port ninety and pitch up sixty. Keep the firing solution running:

Àye, sir. Breaking off,' said the helmsman.The ship swayed, pressing him 74

up against the cushioning of his acceleration couch as the gravity lessened.

`Patch me in to the broadcast antenna:

`Comm live,' came the reply a moment later.

Èmpire Covenant, this is *UES Mon itor.We* offer mutual disengagement.

Please respond'

Carey thumbed the button to disconnect and waited. 'Are we open to receive?' he asked.

`Yes, sit Standard frequencies:

He thumbed the broadcast button again. *'Empire Covenant,* this is UES

Monitor. We offer...'

Acknowledged, *Monitor,'* a subtly alien voice hissed over the radio. 'We accept disengagement.'

Àcknowledged, *Empire Covenant. Monitor* out,' Carey said calmly and cut the connection.

`Maintain this heading. Decrease standard and secure from combat'

Aye, sir,' replied the helmsman, sounding relieved.

Almost immediately the crushing gravity fell away leaving only the standard one-G of Earth. It felt amazingly light. Carey prodded at his commlink. 'MC-one: he ordered and waited for the answering beep that told him he was speaking to the whole ship. All hands, secure from combat,' he said.

`Get us out of here, helm. Climb above the accretion disk and prepare for hyperspace entry, but keep an eye on the *Covenant.* Make sure it doesn't try anything'

Wearily the captain climbed out of his couch and staggered the few steps to the bridge hatchway, unlatching his helmet as he went. He tugged the heavy steel door open and swung himself through into the weightlessness of the central shaft. He looked down the length of the ship and saw Tate helping the Doctor towards the medical bay.A cloud of tiny red droplets swirled around them and the right side of the commander's armour was slicked with blood. Luther away Barnes was dragging the unconscious body of DeSoto in the same direction, with Adams and Lemiesz floating alongside trying to keep pressure on his shoulder wound.

`My God, what happened here?'

Ùh: Tate said, glancing up at her commander. 'Not quite a mutiny, sir.

Luiz shot Chief DeSoto. It's not fatal, but he does need medical attention: Carey massaged his brow. "This just keeps on getting better,' he said tiredly 'What about you, Doctor?'

À small... 'The Doctor coughed and began again. 'Small argument with deck nine: he said.

The captain sighed. All right, get these men to the doctor on the double'

Tate began to pull the Doctor towards the sickbay, but he shook his head. 'Help get DeSoto in. I'm all right for now.'The commander nodded and, with a nimble turn, glided down towards Barnes.

The Doctor grabbed a handhold and oriented himself towards Carey. 'I imagine you're wondering if you've done the right thing about now,' he said quietly.

The captain nodded slowly 'We're all probably going to prison for quite a while after this'

`Very likely. Just remember you saved the best part of twelve billion lives today, Captain:

Ì still don't know whether I believe that' He shook his head. 'I doubt the court martial will accept it either.'

The Doctor smiled briefly through bloodied lips. 'History will vindicate you, Captain.You made the right choice. Just keep telling yourself that you served the greater good:

Ì hope that's enough:

`Whether you believe it or not, we won a great victory today. That should be enough for anyone:

Carey smiled briefly, insincerely. Ì wish I could believe that, too'

`Time will tell. Have faith, Captain'

SECTION 02

FRONTIERS

Paul Leonard

There comes a day when you know it's over. I can't remember now exactly which day it was. It was certainly before the Doctor turned up, with his recorder-playing and his waistcoat and his smile, but not long before. Which makes it about the time of the first murder. I just don't know for sure: the day, the moment. But I remember the feeling, as I looked through the familiar, narrow, distorting pane at the familiar sharp rocks and the broken cloches, and the undulating red land beyond that would never be green, never be blue.

There's

a process: after the anger, after the depression, after the numbness, after the fear, then there is acceptance. Deep, unreasoning, acceptance, at the level of the blood. And with that acceptance, another sort of pain, the kind that is part of you for life. The world that has gone, the opportunity that has burned away and left only its ashes. Fragments in dreams, longings in dreary mornings, memories of dust.

Let me introduce myself. My name is Jovian Pallis and my eyes ache when I look at the sun. I am thin, and tall, and physically clumsy, with long, inarticulate limbs My thoughts are often disconnected, as well. I leave behind me a chain of random associations, incomplete tasks: half-empty mugs, dropped clothes, abandoned poems. These physical and mental attributes made me a bad choice for a Mars colonist, but then, I wanted to go, and my father was project director.

I used to dream of Mars even before the project began, when Dad was young, bright-eyed, incredibly active and enthusiastic, always bringing us the latest files and the latest viewers to experience them. The thin, pink sky, the peaceful deserts that Beagle Two and Gossamer and Landwalker had shown us.The more recent pictures, the ones you could walk in, pick up, feel, these brought to my early adolescence a deep, final fascination.

An obsession. It was so easy to skip forward a hundred years, a thousand, and see the forests, the oceans, the blue, living skies.

No wonder we were fooled, not just me, not just my father, but all of us.

Of course, nothing is that easy. In the world outside programmed simulation, it turns out that making life is far harder than taking it away. In the world, the light, poisonous world with the sunburn-

coloured sky, there is only dust, the infinitely fine Martian dust that, seen close up, is not red, rather a grey-brown powder, something with almost no colour at all.

Yet it is solid: it seeps into the careful engineering of our space-suits, grits 79

the thin burnished metal of our cooking pans, interrupts the tiny lasers of our computers, chokes the pores of our skin, gradually infuses every organ of our bodies, including our brains. We become one with the dust and, after years (acceptance again), we understand only the dust.

When you kill, you are killing only dust.

Disconnected thoughts.A murderer's thoughts.

Am I a murderer? We all were, I suppose. The Doctor said we were all mad, didn't he?

I haven't told you about anyone else - how typical of me. Well, there were sixty of us on the base. Mars colonists; men and women.There were going to be children, too. Long-limbed, big-eyed, gazelle-like children, who would walk on the scrubby surface with their oxygen masks, learning to play in the world they would build. But Martian children were just a gleam in the simulator's program; the reality was too dangerous, and never clean enough, and anyway, at an estimated support cost of a billion dollars a child, we never had the money. There were procedures (which means chemicals), to stop it happening by accident.

So Marissa was the closest to a child we had. Big-eyed enough, lissom enough, younger than most of us. One of the second wave to come from Earth. Quick to smile, and a little careless, with machines and with emotions, which is probably why she died. I was in love with her, of course, in the hopeless way a thirty-nine-year-old man will love a twenty-three-year-old woman who is cleverer and more beautiful than he could ever be. I don't suppose she knew about it, and my silly longings are irrelevant to the story; in fact I don't know why I mentioned them.

Disconnected thoughts again.

She died in her second summer on Mars, my third summer. She was on an expedition: not a big one, because we didn't do those any more; just a short trot up the slope to the rim of the Vallis Marinaris.There was some sort of scientific excuse, for the people on Earth, but no real

reason. You can't stay in a metal prison every day of your life.

Right at the top of the cliffs, in the near-vacuum, she stopped to smell the breeze - took her face mask off. It was idiotic, but we all did it occasionally to try and prove that it was our world: that we could breathe its air, which we couldn't; that we could smell its fresh empty pastures, which didn't exist; drink from its streams, which froze over a million years ago and would never thaw, and were poisonous anyway. You get the picture. Foolish dreams.

At first it seemed like Marissa had just been unlucky. The seal connecting the air tube to her face *mask* had a crack in it When she moved the mask it opened further, the air blew out, straight from the tank 80

at full pressure. She fell backwards across the sharp rocks. It would have been funny, if she'd been on flat ground and the others could have got to her with a spare mask. But there was a five-kilometre slope just behind her, running all the way to the bottom of the valley. It wasn't sheer, just steep, but Marissa was half-stunned and short of breath. She couldn't stop herself sliding. By the time the others reached her, on a ledge about a kilometre down, she was dead.

There were certain advantages to me from Marissa's death. It sounds horrible to say it. Of course I knew it was a final, fatal blow to any hopes of renewing the project, but then I'd lost those hopes some time ago. Of course I was sad to lose Marissa, but the strange, compressed state of our emotions in that warren of steel boxes left little room for real sadness.

Marissa's beauty and my love for her had been making me angry, stirring resentments in the same way water stirs the dead surface of Mars, making it into poisonous, bubbling slurry. I didn't want to feel like that for two years until the *Viking Challenger came* to collect us. I felt it was dangerous. I didn't know what I might do, as a result of my feelings.

I wanted to feel nothing. I wanted the two years to pass in silence, as if I were nothing but dust. Marissa's death brought me closer to that state, made me safer. It sounds mad to react to a death like that; it sounds beyond redemption. But it was the way I felt.

There was another advantage for me, in the numb aftermath: for a short time, for a few precious moments, I was able to have a normal human relationship with my colleague Isabel de Veigh.

Let me explain. Isabel was the kind of woman who took people as she found them, which meant that she made a judgement and didn't change it. She made a judgement early on in our working relationship, that I was weak and pointless and a daddy's boy. She never said it to my face but I'm sure she said it behind my back, many times, because I heard the things she said about other people. Every day. Words echoed in the base, crawled around corners, hung against the pressure-glass windows with their distorting views of inside and outside alike.

Physically, Isabel was small, round-faced, and a little plump. She smiled a lot, got on well with women, and flirted with men, although she didn't flirt with me. She had a couple of relationships during the time I worked with her: private, discreet affairs with people who had other partners. **I** didn't interfere, or comment, but that didn't seem to improve her opinion of me. Those kinds of feelings are in the blood, genetic. A is inferior to **B:** substitute the names of any two people you know and the equation will work, one way round or the other.There won't be any doubt, unless you don't know them very well.

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Isabel and I worked in the air room. It wasn't our main job, but it was our shared chore. Everyone on the base had a chore - two hours a day -

in addition to their main job (mine was systems accountant).The chore is a vital job that needs to be done by a human expert, that can't just be trusted to the systems. So Isabel and I had to physically check, by hand, each set of air tanks, each day. To keep them topped up, check the seals, check that the automatic processes that also monitored these things were doing their job as they should be. Before I came out, there was only Isabel on the air room. With the second wave, a second person was needed. I suppose my father thought it would be an easy chore, something I could do away from his supervision, whilst he sat in his glass office on Earth and played politics with the administrators and the funding bodies.

Me? I was glad to be there, whatever I was doing.You couldn't call the air-room chore fun, though. The same rank of metal and plastic bottles every day, for ten years. The same readings to check, the manual gauges, the endoscopic inspection of the tubes and seals. The same check-boxes to check on the same head-up displays, until all trace of satisfaction at that row of green lights, that perfect poker-hand of working air bottles, had long since faded away. It was as if we were

counting the particles of dust on the surface of Mars: a job that would never end, and had no purpose.

So when Isabel cried, for a moment I had a purpose again. It was wonderful. She was sobbing over an air bottle: I could see her tears running down the bright yellow plastic coating.

She heard me, turned. Ì let her down, Jovian. I checked that mask an hour before she went out. I must have missed the damage.'

I stepped forward, frowning:It was damaged?'

`Yes it was damaged!' she snapped. 'Why do you think it fell apart? And I missed it. I killed her: Her face was dirty with tears.

`You've never missed one before:

Her eyes met mine for a second, and she even gave me a slight smile.

"that's no comfort. But thanks for trying:

`The least I could do,' I murmured, feeling proud.

She frowned then, and looked at me, as if reading something from my face.

Òkay,' she said, her voice uneven. To work.'

She glanced at me a few times more in the next couple of hours, as we worked quietly together, double-checking every face mask. We'd been instructed to do that, of course, after the failure. I kept wondering why she was glancing at me. I kept-wondering what she felt. Whatever it was, our normal relationship - all thirty seconds of it - was over.

I couldn't believe it the next day when Uther died. It seemed so unfair. He was forty-five and he'd been with the project since the start.The youngest 82

one on the first team, twenty-two when he went out. He'd gone back to Earth at the end of the first stint, come back three years later with the second crew.A big strong man, he fixed things when they went wrong, by brute force if he had to. He was popular, had many friends, and two partners, a man on Earth who looked after his children, and a woman called Edna here on Mars.

As with Marissa, we didn't know it was murder at first. He died in

the Ponds. That sounds like something you might have in a back garden on Earth, but was in fact a romantic name for the external water dump. We used sunlight to make water from the peroxides in the soil; since this was an easy, low-maintenance process, we had a constant, if low-volume, supply. Water that had been used in our industrial processes, and was therefore unsuitable for recycling, we released to the environment, just like on Earth. It was supposed to boil away into the near-vacuum of the Martian

'atmosphere', but it didn't all go. It accumulated, mixing with soil in a cyanous slime.Attempts to use tailored bacteria to clear up the mess had produced spectacular colours in the Ponds: stripes of bright sulphur yellow, cornflower blue, a flocculent magenta. In the base of an ancient crater, hard rock below kept the water near, but not quite at, the surface.

The idea had originally been to stop it from polluting the water table -

ludicrous! On warm days the water would bubble up and form temporary slurry ponds. Poisonous as hell, of course, and dangerous: but they looked like the places where life had started on Earth, so you could pretend there was hope.

At first it looked as if Uther had been down there, looking at the Ponds (which he often did), had stepped in the wrong place and fallen through into the hot, deadly mud. Another tragedy. Some of us thought it might be suicide, though Uther's partner, Edna, vehemently denied this, grey-faced, saying he'd been disappointed, but not suicidal, and looking forward to his retirement on Earth.The debate passed to and fro, in whispers, in earnest conversation, in rhetorical arguments, words echoing off the metal walls.

Then the Doctor arrived, and threw doubt on everything.

We accepted him like a miracle. The stranger wandering in from the empty plains suggested a living planet, a place that had other towns, and although we knew that there were not and had never been any other manned bases, we were clutching at straws. He had the relevant authorisation to get past my father, l suppose. We knew he must have, in reality, come from off Mars, and therefore in a spaceship of some kind, but none of us actually dared ask him how - after all, we'd have known, really, if a spaceship had landed anywhere near us. There was no rationality

to it at all: none of us wanted to break the dream, I suppose.

Did he know about the murders before he came? I don't know. He 83

peered around the silver shell of the base, his bright eyes illuminating the decay the old switch-gear, the heavy, unused lifting tackle, the living accommodation shared with broken surface rovers and long-dead experiments, pot plants with rotted leaves and mouldering soil, empty tanks encrusted with industrial poisons. His wooden recorder echoed eerily in the thin air of the hanger canopies, where the carcasses of unfinished orbital shuttles rusted slowly 'What happened to them?' he asked me (he seemed to prefer my company, for some reason).

`They were never finished. We were going to extract titanium from the soil and export it, but they decided it was uneconomic. Cheaper to get it from the Moon, apparently:

He nodded, clucked his tongue. 'It would be, it would be. Short-sighted as ever.'

As I've said, I knew by then it was over. I knew it in my blood. So I *didn't* launch into my usual diatribe. I didn't take advantage of that hint of sympathy to pour out my frustration. I didn't tell him about the sly politicking of the administrators on Earth, the slow strangulation of the project, the funding cut back and cut back again.The slow growth of the notion, like a strangler fig choking a tree, that Mars was a big waste of time and they should be putting the Earth first. It was pointless discussing all that, even with a sympathetic stranger.

Perhaps the Doctor read my face, because he changed the subject. 'Who has access to the air tanks for the surface suits?'

`You don't know?' By now, most of us had assumed the Doctor was an official accident investigator, however bizarre that might seem. Remember we were all pretty nearly mad, shut up in that place without hope and more than two years to wait until the last ship home.

He folded his arms, fixed his illuminating eyes on me. 'Assume I don't know anything'

I nodded:The official answer is, Isabel de Veigh and myself. No one else.

In practice - ' I shrugged. 'We've been here twenty years, Doctor. Everyone knows the air-room codes'

Did you like Uther?'

I paused to consider this. Dust swirled in the hanger, lightly, slowly, as if disturbed by a ghost. 'You don't like or dislike people, do you? After this long cooped up together to no good purpose.You just get on as best you can and wait for it to end:

Ànd after it ends?'

I shrugged. 'Something different, I suppose:

He was still staring at me.

`Do you think it was murder?'Actually I didn't care what he thought, but it seemed the obvious question.

Ì'm keeping an open mind,' he said evenly `Have you any theories?'

I watched the swirling dust. It seemed to have thickened, darkened.

`None that stay the same for more than a few minutes.'

He got out his recorder and began to play again. A hornpipe. I waited until it was obvious he'd forgotten that I existed, then left him to it.

`You know it's either me or you?'

Isabel's voice made me jump: she wasn't due in for her shift for two hours. I didn't turn round for several seconds, staring at the manual air gauge on the bottle I'd been checking, weighing up my options.

Ùther's air was poisoned, you know. Probably Marissa too. She took her mask off because she was choking, not to smell the breeze.'

I turned and stared at her:Anyone can get in here.You know that'

`Not anyone knows how to override the safety checks. To make it look **as** if everything's okay. And not everyone has the mission map of every **walk and would know exactly where she'd be when she went on to the second tank, so that she'd fall down that slope and die and it would look like an accident. Anyway, you wouldn't have answered like that if you hadn't done it'**

I tried to ignore the last remark, ignore the twisting pain it made in my gut. 'Harry would know how to do it,' I said. Harry Ensnape was the designer of the air room systems.

Isabel paused. 'Possibly. But he hasn't used the place for years. He never even goes outside.You and I are here every day'

I wanted to bluster. To say, *Are you accusing me of murder?* But what was the point? It wouldn't have made the situation any better. It **looked like either I was going to kill her or she was going to kill me. I looked around for a suitable weapon, feeling desperate, angry and trapped.**

And there's the question of motive, I'm afraid'

I whirled round, saw the Doctor behind me.

`You couldn't take your eyes off Marissa: Isabel again. I turned back to face het She was still staring, her little piggy eyes bright with anger.

Èverybody noticed:

And I killed her because I loved her?' I turned back to the Doctor. `Does that sound probable to you?'

Isabel answered. 'Because you couldn't have her, I suppose. Although since you didn't even try - '

I interrupted her. 'And Uther?'

It was almost funny, seeing Isabel's face twist as she tried to work out a motive for that one.

'He was trying to kill you: The Doctor. After a second I realised he was talking to Isabel, as if I were beneath his notice. jovian knew you'd guessed. Or thought you might have done. He knew you were planning to 85

go down to the Ponds before the start of your shift. He didn't expect Uther to turn up.And Uther never followed procedures properly - he just grabbed the next air bottle in line and left:

That wasn't my fault: I could feel the hot blood creeping into my face.

It was more embarrassment than anything else Isabel had suspected me.

I'd had to try and get rid of her before it was too late. How was I supposed to know Uther would come barging in?

I wanted to kill them now.That poisoned Martian slurry was boiling up in my mind again. But I didn't see how I could tackle both of them, and before I could really think about it my arms were gripped by an irresistible force and locked behind my back.

`You're lucky' The Doctor's voice, almost in my ear. His breath was strangely sterile, with no human smell: for some reason, that made me feel safer. 'Isabel's sane, unlike most of you here. She knows the only way out of this without more killing is for you to disappear. For them to assume you killed yourself. For them to assume you feel remorse, which I know you don't:

I wanted to say, *I do feel remorse, I didn't want her to die.* But I couldn't quite believe it of myself. All I felt was dust, filling my joints, scratching my intestines, seeping out of my mouth, as if I were a broken rag doll in the Doctor's grip.

There was a strange box in the corner of the room, like a huge nineteenth-century packing crate stood on its end. It was dark blue, and had a door. I found myself being walked towards it.

I struggled, but a hand slapped my face. Isabel, her cheeks blazing with anger. You're lucky I didn't kill you myself. Now get out. Go with the Doctor.'

Maybe I am a daddy's boy, like Isabel thought. Maybe I am useless, inferior Whatever. I let myself be led away, without a struggle, without any more argument.

The sky was blue and tall blades of grass stretched in long, gentle waves.

literally blades: a metre high, diamond-shaped, smelling of fruit sugar, they rustled against the edges of the packing-crate that the Doctor called his TARDIS. On the horizon, I could see hills, and the violet rim of the sky.The sun, bigger than I was used to, hung in the sky. But the gravity was the same.

Light, like at the base; Mars gravity, not the three-times heaviness of Earth.

Ìs this Mars?' I asked 'Mars in the future?' The Doctor had explained that he had a time machine.

Ì can't tell you that,' he said. He pushed me gently from the door, pressed a small metal box into my hand:Live for the moment, my friend.

You can eat the grass here: He pointed, in case I hadn't noticed it.

Then, with a wind-machine roar, he and the TARDIS were gone.

* * *

86

I soon worked out that the box was a voice recorder, and I soon worked out why the Doctor had given it to me. I had to have something to talk to, and something to talk back to me, because there were no people on this world. No villages, no towns, no roads. Nothing human had lived here in a long time, perhaps never had, perhaps never will.

I walked to the hills, I walked beyond them.There was grass, there were low trees with sweet fruit, there were glittering insects and swift, quiet animals about the size of cats, long-snouted, silver, slit-eyed. But apart from the wind in the grass and the occasional hiss of rainfall, there was no sound.

At first I was angry: but I knew that the Doctor had rescued me from probable death, certain imprisonment and contempt. Over time, over wanderings, I came to understand why Isabel had thought I was inferior, and why she was right. Why the Doctor, in his wisdom, had seen that despite what I had done I was not an evil man, but that because of who I was I could never be allowed the company of other human beings again.

This is the quality of the Doctor's mercy, and the quality of my luck, after the terrible things I have done (and I know that they were terrible, even though I do not feel it). I will live in this Eden that is a little like the Mars I dreamed of, and when I die, the little silver beasts and the crawling insects will come and eat me. My flesh will become flesh. My substance will carry on living, it will complete the cycle, and death will not have won.

Despite my false dreams, I will not become dust.

87

Light at the End of the Tunnel

Mark Wright

Peri felt the scorch of heat slice over her head as she sprinted after the Doctor down the starkly lit corridor.The energy beam bit angrily into the wall, leaving a nasty scorch mark and tingeing the air with a smell not unlike burnt almonds.

She glanced quickly over her shoulder to catch a splodge of dark blue figures lining up, more soldiers taking aim to blast them into mush.

`Doctor!'

'Keep running The Doctor was running so fast his legs were a blur of red and cream. As he ran, his hat suddenly flew backwards off his head, long arms flailing to catch it, but luckily it blew straight into Peri's outstretched hand.The Doctor looked back quickly, more relieved that his silly hat had been rescued than he was worried about the soldiers who were trying to kill them.

`N'Tian plasma lances... work by focusing the beam... through a remarkably efficient... cascade of... energy distribution nodes,' the Doctor called over his shoulder.

`So?' Peri grunted as the Doctor threw back his hand to grab hers, hauling her bodily around an intersection in the corridor as more energy beams bombarded the wall. She gasped as he pushed her into the shelter of the corridor wall.

`So?' The Doctor looked down at Peri, the two caught in a brief eye of calm amidst Klaxons, shouted orders, heavy boot steps and discharged weapons. Ìf you know the function of whatever it is that's trying to kill you, chances are you can find a way of stopping it'

Òr you just know that you're going to die in a remarkably efficient way?

Peri smiled weakly as she held out the Doctor's hat.

The Doctor frowned and took it:`Hmm , quite: He jammed the Panama onto his head, snapping round at the sound of approaching feet. He pushed the flat of his hand down on Peri's head, forcing her to the ground. `Down!'

A barrage of plasma discharge crashed into the wall and the next

thing Peri felt was the Doctor grabbing her hand once more as she was yanked down the corridor after him 'Come on!'

The Doctor hared round another corner in the maze of corridors and Peri cannoned into his stationary form as she came after him, the breath knocked from her for a second. In front of them was a resolutely closed pair of elevator doors. The Doctor leapt forward and stabbed a finger at 89

the call button, waited patiently for a few seconds before hitting it again.

When nothing continued to happen, he started to jab the button repeatedly as if it would help call the elevator faster.

'Going up?' Peri asked, looking over her shoulder in concern at the rapidly approaching boot steps.

Àpparently not,' said the Doctor, removing his hat and looking up as if he could see the descending car.

`Now what?'

Èrm..:The Doctor looked around, taking in every detail of the corner of corridor that was now effectively a dead end. 'I don't know.'

`Doctor!' The soldiers were almost upon them, boot steps thudding from every direction. Do something!'

Ì'm thinking, Peri. It's very... A-ha!'

The Doctor's gaze halted on a section of wall close to the floor, and Peri could have sworn he"d just seen an old friend.

`Halt!' The N'Tian soldier cocked his weapon as he jumped into the corridor... to find nothing. He was certain the two aggressors had run into this intersection, and so, it seemed, were the rest of his unit who crammed into the corridor behind him, weapons brought to bear.

The lift doors opened with a cheery *ping,* revealing an empty car. The unit looked around in confusion as the soldier thumbed open a comm channel. He cleared his throat. Sir? We have a problem:

In the darkness, Peri could hear the soldiers' feet milling around as if they were right next to her. A sliver of light clicked on and the Doctor was illuminated from below, the shadows casting an eerie darkness

onto his face. He held a cautionary finger to his lips:Shh He shone the pen torch around the cramped shaft in which they now found themselves. The brushed steel of the shaft glinted in the torchlight and a rhythmic thudding came from somewhere behind them, the source hidden in the black square into which the shaft disappeared.

`What is this thing?' Peri whispered.

The Doctor grinned back at her mischievously. 'Ventilator shaft. Come on.' The Doctor twisted expertly around on himself like Harry Houdini, and began to crawl slowly and quietly forward into the darkness. Peri took a deep breath and struggled after him, the confused sounds of the soldiers soon left behind.

They crawled in silence for what seemed like hours, the Doctor as usual barely breaking a sweat. The thudding came from all around them like a giant heartbeat. Every now and then a fly would buzz around her face, landing on her hands or forehead, forcing her to stop and shoo it away. Peri tried to remember a time when she'd felt this tired, dirty, sweaty 90

and plain miserable and was about to give up when she remembered.

Sarn.

It was funny how the events of just a couple of days ago had become hazy so quickly. As she wiped the grimy sweat from her forehead and pressed on, Peri wondered if her mind had activated some kind of selective memory defence mechanism to stop her going mad. If she actually stopped for one second to think about the situation she'd landed herself in (the whole travelling through space in a phone booth with a strange although, admittedly, very sweet guy), that was exactly what she would end up doing. She wondered if the Doctor would put up with a hysterically giggling teenage idiot, huddled in the corner of the control room.

Up ahead, the Doctor suddenly dropped out of sight and for a horrible lurching second, Peri thought her friend had fallen to a squelchy death hundreds of feet below until his hands appeared out of the darkness to gently grab her wrists and pull her forward.

`Down you come,' he said as he helped her into the chamber that the ventilator shaft opened into.The Doctor clicked the torch off, as there was enough light spilling into the room through venting slats in the ceiling and floor. Three of the walls were taken up with an enormous fan, the blades turning slowly but rhythmically with an impressive

whooshing noise as they came past. Instead of a hoped-for cooling breeze, the heat was actually more stifling here. Three sets of ladders disappeared up into hatchways in the ceiling.

The Doctor had removed his hat and was staring up at the fans with a boyishly fascinated grin.

`Now where are we?'

Àt a guess, I'd say this was a thermal distribution node for the ventilation network. Impressive, don't you think?'

Peri had other concerns on her mind. `But are we safe?'

The Doctor cocked a look towards her. —Safe" can be a sketchy concept, Peri. But...' He caught his companion's admonishing look, Èrm ... yes, for the time being.'

That's reassuring.' Peri sat down on the polished steel of the floor and stretched her legs out. 'Doctor, can I ask you something?'

Ànything you like:The Doctor had pulled a feather from his pocket and was pacing the room, dropping the feather here and there to see how fast It fell.

`You were trying to get to a place called' - she thought for a second -

`Headingly?'

`That's right'

`To see some guy called Boycott score ... ' She got lost in the language of cricket.

`His hundredth hundred. Very important moment in English sports history. I've always wanted to see that.'

`But instead, by no fault of your own, you end up five hundred years in the future and thousands of light years off course and accidentally stir up a rebellion between the N'Tians and their oppressed slave workers?'

The feather had gone now and the Doctor was measuring out strides across the length of the chamber. Ah yes, that's about the face of it.Why?'

Peri swatted away another fly that buzzed around her head for a second. `No reason. Just wondered if this sort of thing happened a lot.

The Doctor's strides had taken him up to one of the fans and he jumped around as if he was playing a game of hopscotch. He looked at her.A little sheepishly, if Peri didn't know better:Let's just say I lead a colourful and varied lifestyle.'

`You can say that again? Peri got to her feet and brushed down the front of her trousers. 'Can we go back to the TARDIS now?'

`Yes, I think our new friends on N'Tia should be able to sort themselves out from now on, which is usually our cue to slip out by the tradesman's entrance: He swatted at a fly with his hat. 'Problem is, the tradesman's entrance is about two miles above us, so we'd better get climbing. And quickly: He glanced into the shaft they'd emerged from. 'It's not going to take those soldiers long to figure out where we went.'

Peri cast her eyes heavenwards and offered up a small prayer. *Please Lord. Get me out of this. Get me of this planet and back to Earth. I promise I'll be good. I'll be nice to Howard. I'll keep up with my reading schedule. I wanted to see the universe, not get killed. Please help.*

She took a deep breath and looked over at the Doctor as he stepped forward, a look of concern in his eyes. 'Are you all right?'

Peri smiled weakly 'Yeah, fine'

Ì'm sorry about this, Peri. We'll be back in the TARDIS soon and then I promise, I'll take you anywhere you want to go:

'Anywhere?'

Àbsolutely!'

I may hold you to that, Peri thought guiltily.

`Now, based on the flow of air through this chamber, I'd say that our quickest and safest route would be...' He considered several of the openings in the ceiling. "That one!' He pointed definitely at a ladder disappearing into the ceiling and wandered over to it, peering up into yet another square of darkness. 'I'd better go first. Just in case. After all, we don't know what's waiting for us:The Doctor smiled at Peri and patted her arm reassuringly 'Come on!'

Peri swatted irritably at another fly that buzzed lazily around her, and she noticed they were everywhere, buzzing in and out of the vents and hatchways around the chamber. They seemed particularly attracted to the 92

Doctor, almost swarming around his legs and coat-tails. In the light cast from below it looked decidedly eerie.

`Where are these flies coming from?' she asked. The Doctor looked around and down, as if noticing the insects for the first time. He swatted at them playfully with his hat and they buzzed out of the way.

`They're probably the indigenous life form to this particular ventilation system.

`You're kidding.'

`Not at all: The Doctor started to bound energetically up the ladder.

Didn't this guy get tired? 'Life forms adapt to their surroundings: The Doctor had reached the top of the ladder before it disappeared into the ceiling, and clicked his torch on again. He shone it into the space above him and climbed a couple more rungs so his head and shoulders vanished.The Doctor's voice echoed back to her:Did you know that the London Underground has its own unique species of mosquito?'

`No, I've never been: Peri followed as the Doctor disappeared ahead of her.

`Remind me to take you. I keep meaning to see *Les Mis.* Always wondered what Victor would have made of it...'

They continued to climb, sometimes in darkness with only the light of the Doctor's torch to guide them. At intervals, service lighting cast dirty illumination on their progress.

Peri ploughed doggedly on. She could have been in Morocco. Instead, she was being entertained by the tread of the Doctor's shoes as he climbed above her.

The Doctor stopped suddenly and Peri almost got a mouthful of leather.

From the way he stood on the ladder, Peri could tell he had tensed up.

`Doctor? What is it?' she called up.

`Spider, the Doctor said through gritted teeth.

`What?'

`There's a spider just in front of me:

`So?' Peri couldn't believe this.

`Doctor, out with it'

Ì'm not particularly keen on spiders'

Peri started to laugh. It was a chuckle at first, but rapidly expanded into a huge belly laugh. The Doctor looked down at her, shining his torch into her eyes.

`What's so funny?' he asked, genuinely affronted.

Peri stopped laughing with an exaggerated cough. 'Nothing. I just can't take...'

`When you've seen some of the spiders I have, then you can laugh: Òk: Peri stifled a smirk.

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The Doctor stayed where he was.

`What are you waiting for?'

Èrm... could you... erm...'

`You don't seriously want me to get it out of your way?'

`Well...' The Doctor swung round to the side of the ladder, allowing Peri room to move past him. She sighed and started to climb, stopping when she was level with the Doctor. She fixed him with a weary stare.

'Where is it?' she asked.

The Doctor pointed. 'Just there:

Peri looked up to see what looked like any old average house spider

sitting harmlessly in a web, some of the ubiquitous flies suspended in the silvery threads That's it? The guy who happily whips up revolutions and faces down megalomaniacs is scared of a teeny little spider?'

'Peri, you're not helping: said the Doctor dryly.

Peri held out a free hand and coaxed the spider into her palms and it dropped harmlessly from an invisible thread to a rung lower down, scuttling away into the shadows.

`There; all gone.'

Thank you,' the Doctor said curtly.

Peri stifled another giggle:Do you want me to go first? You know, just in case:

That's quite all right, Peri. I think I can manage:

The Doctor started climbing again.

They climbed in silence.

Flies buzzed around them, food for the spiders that hung in webs here and there amongst the maze of shafts. The Doctor seemed to find some steel and ignored them, Peri guessing that he was trying to save face.

They crawled along shafts, up shafts, down ladders, up ladders, seemingly at random. Peri had no sense that they were getting any closer to the surface and the safety of the TARDIS and wondered if the Doctor had any idea where they were going.

They had been climbing a particular ladder for ages, the shaft dimly lit.

Peri had somehow got ahead of the Doctor, and she kept glancing down past him. It was a very long way down. She stopped when the ladder reached two shafts that branched off to the left and right, the ladder carrying on straight up.

`Which way?' she asked the Doctor.

`Try the left-hand shaft; I want to get some bearings, and it may lead to another distribution node.'

Ìf you're sure: Peri clambered into the shaftway and crawled in.Ahead

there was light and the now familiar whooshing noise of the fans. The Doctor had guessed correctly.

94

The Doctor pulled himself into the shaft and started after Peri when a crackle and a mechanical clang from the shaft they had just entered from stopped him short.

`What's that?' Peri didn't really want to know, but it seemed like the only question to ask under the circumstances.

The Doctor turned back on himself and shuffled forward a few feet to peer back down the ladder. He shoved himself back towards her very quickly. A service drone! And by the gleam in its eye, I'd say it had some fatal rewiring in mind. On you go, quick as you can!'

Peri began to propel herself up the shaft, the clanking, whirring sound getting ever nearer. She looked back and wished she hadn't. The drone emerged over the top of the ladder. Six mechanical arms heaved it into the shaft, its two flat camera-eyes scanning around, but it wasn't that that freaked Peri out. It was the mandible-like attachment, snapping together menacingly, that sent a shiver down her spine. She watched as the machine's eyes scanned the walls of the shaft and then it rose up on its legs, firing a stream of wire from its mandibles into a damaged section of ducting, accompanied by a shower of sparks. Its repair work completed, the robot settled back on its legs with a contented whir.

Peri strained to see round the Doctor:Do you think it's...'

The robot's head swivelled round to fix the companions in its electronic gaze.

Seen us?'The Doctor asked as the machine raised up on its legs once more as if ready to pounce. 'I should say so. Keep going!'

The Doctor and Peri pulled themselves through the shaft, Peri's elbows grazing painfully against the polished metal that surrounded them, the ever-present flies buzzing around incessantly. The whir and metallic snapping and scraping preventing the need to look back: the robot was still after them, obviously intending to carry out some more repair work.

Pity there wasn't a spider's web big enough to trap it.

The shaft opened out like all the others had into a distribution chamber, the three fans working incessantly and Peri tumbled onto the floor with **a** painful thud, the Doctor not far behind. He pulled Peri to her feet, looking around for an escape route, only this time, there were no ladders **to** take them to safety.

Ah:The Doctor whipped round to look back at the shaft.A flash of sparks haloed around the entrance - the robot would be through in seconds.

`Now what?' Peri asked, trying to keep the hysteria from her voice.This was too much.

`We have to put it out of action:

`How?'

`We distract it and do some rewiring of our own! Peri, stand over here where it can see you'

`What?' Peri almost screamed at the Doctor.

`Trust me.' He guided her to the centre of the room then dived into the far corner, fumbling in his pockets and crouching down. Waiting.

Peri stared with wide eyes as two claw-like appendages attached themselves to the sides of the shaft's entrance, and the glow of the service drone's flat eyes emerged from the darkness.

`Hi; she breathed nervously, as the creature pulled its metal bulk athletically through the opening and sprang into the chamber. It sat gazing at Peri for a second, subroutines buried deep within its computerised brain presumably assessing the repair work that needed to be carried out on this rogue element within its domain. Compressed air filled mechanical joints and the robot's body rose and fell smoothly, fluidly, as if it were waiting to pounce. Peri gritted her teeth, with no idea what the Doctor was planning.

With a snap of its mandibles, the robot made to strike, and so did the Doctor. 'Over here; he called, rolling a cricket ball across the room and throwing a second in a graceful arc over the machine. Its head swivelled this way and that, its brain confused by the new parameters that swamped its processing unit. In that split second, the Doctor dived on top of the drone, throwing his hat over its electronic eyes.

'Peri! Get down!' The Doctor clung on bravely as the creature started thrashing chaotically, metal limbs slicing the air in all directions. Peri dived under an arm that threatened to take her head off as the Doctor deftly brandished a penknife, which he used to remove an inspection panel in the machine's neck.

With a shake of its head, the machine was free of its makeshift blindfold and focused its gaze on Peri, the Doctor pulling wires from its innards in desperation. Peri didn't know which way to jump as the machine leapt forward.

`Doctor!' she screamed as a metal claw clamped around her neck. The Doctor winced in pain as he touched two wires together and sparks erupted around his fingers.

`Not that one,' he grunted.

Peri grabbed the arm with both hands and attempted to pull herself free, but she was stuck fast. The wire-dispensing mandible snapped together twice and began extending towards her head. Doctor!'

`What about this one?' he touched two more wires together and the creature gave an involuntary spasm and the claw tightened around Peri's neck, who half screamed and choked in pain. `Definitely not that one!

Hold on!'

Wires began to snake from the mandible, spatting as they began to thrash around Peri's head. The Doctor frantically ripped more wires from the machine's innards. These. Or nothing!' He touched the wires together and 96

they sparked violently. The claw loosened and Peri dropped to the floor.

As the machine thrashed around, the Doctor jumped clear and pulled Peri free. A whine of power filled the room and the machine went berserk; arms, mandibles and head spinning wildly out of control. The power whine reached a crescendo as the Doctor pushed Peri into the shelter of the wall, shielding her. The robot exploded in a blaze of sparks and flame as its innards were ripped apart from the inside out, showering the Doctor and Peri in a hail of debris.

The Doctor got to his feet and brushed himself off, looking down

at Peri:Are you all right?' She nodded silently and he checked her neck for bruising:No damage: you'll be fine.'

Leaving Peri for a second, the Doctor wandered over the wreckage of the machine and retrieved his hat. He wafted away the smoke and peered into the burning remains 'Wonderful piece of engineering,' he marvelled.

Peri began to cry, face buried in her hands. Ì can't do this,' she breathed, cheeks stinging with the embarrassment. She heard the squeak of the Doctor's sneakers as he slowly walked over and crouched down, a reassuring hand on her shoulder.

`Do what?' he asked gently.

Peri looked up into that face that should have been ridged with careworn lines but was impossibly fresh and young. She gestured at their surroundings. The flames that licked the wreckage of the drone had subsided, leaving acrid smouldering wires and melting plastic. 'This!' she gasped through her tears.'Being shot at by soldiers. Stirring up rebellions.

Climbing through miles of tunnels. Getting my brain re-wired by that...'

she jabbed a finger towards the drone,' ...thing!'

'I know. And I'm sorry' the Doctor said awkwardly. 'I do rather tend to get carried away with things.'

Ì wanted to backpack round the world, Doctor. I thought you were going to show me amazing things, not get my head blown off.'The Doctor squeezed her shoulder and looked deep into her eyes.

`Nobody travels with me against their will,' he said. 'When we get back to the TARDIS, I can set the co-ordinates and take you straight back to Lanzarote

. It'll be like you've never been away' A handkerchief appeared in his hands and he offered it to Peri, who took it with a weak but grateful smile:I don't want to see you go, but is that what you'd like?'

Peri wiped her eyes. Did *she want* to go home? Howard had forbidden her to go off travelling with those guys she'd met

whilst he was off fishing for useless relics, and Mom was traipsing round the island with the tedious Van Gyseghams. She could remember the almost mocking, challenging gleam in Howard's eyes, as if he didn't think she was capable of going to buy a doughnut, never mind travelling to Africa. She couldn't stand to let him win, to prove him right. She was tougher than that; but 97

look at what was happening. In Morocco, the only danger was likely to be a frisky local feeling her up, not an evil regime intent on making sure she never travelled anywhere again.

Peri looked up at the Doctor and nodded. He smiled encouragingly

`That's settled then'

I'm sorry, Doctor. It's just...'

Ì know. If you stayed a while longer, perhaps you'd understand. But, this life isn't for everybody:The Doctor held out his hand and pulled Peri to her feet.

A hissing sound filled the mom. Peri looked around worriedly.`Now what?'

The Doctor's brow creased for a second, eyes scanning for the source of the hissing:I don't like the sound of this, Peri:

Peri chuckled mirthlessly:Tell me something I don't know'

Alert!' A metallically smooth computer voice announced. 'Purification sequence in progress. Alert!'

Òh dear' the Doctor said unnecessarily. A series of apertures opened around the chamber and a sickly looking green vapour began to cloud into the room, the hissing becoming more violent by the second.

`Sterilisation gas!'

`That can't be good!' Peri shouted over the noise.

Ìt isn't. Come on!' The Doctor grabbed Peri's hand and the two made for the shaft they had entered through, the Doctor helping Peri up before clambering after her.

`Quickly!' the Doctor urged. The gas billowed into the shaft and was moving at quite a rate.

Peri reached the end of the shaft where the service drone had appeared from, swinging onto the ladder, desperately trying to ignore the long drop below A second shaft stretched forward ahead of them The Doctor's head appeared from the shaft, wisps of gas wreathed around him. Peri started to cough.

Ùp, down or straight on?' she asked.

The Doctor assessed the options, and Peri knew from his face that he didn't have a clue.The wisps of gas were becoming thicker.

Àlert. Purification beta wave commencing: More apertures opened around the shaft. Peri started to cough as more of the green gas began to pour into the shaft.

The Doctor jumped as a spider crawled across his hand. He stared at it in fascination as it started to climb up the sheer wall of the shaft.

"This is no time ... ' Peri coughed,lo worry about some... dumb spider!'

`No, look!'The Doctor pointed towards the spider, which had joined a line of the arachnids that were all crawling straight up the wall:They're avoiding the gas! Follow that spider, Peri!'

Gas billowed around her, and Peri lost sight of the Doctor's face, her 98

arms and legs suddenly feeling weak. Did she lose her grip on the ladder?

She couldn't remember...

Gas seeped out between the slats of a ventilation grill, dissipating into cool night air. The metallic front of the grill buckled under a sudden impact that echoed into the distance, followed by a second impact that knocked the grill open. The sickly gas billowed outwards and upwards.

A Panama hat was thrown out of the shaft, quickly followed by the Doctor. He leant back inside the shaft, and pulled a coughing and spluttering Peri into the fresh air. A breeze carried away the worst of the gas, and the Doctor laid Peri onto the soft grass. She took a huge gulp of air, followed by another.

`That's it; catch your breath:

Peri resisted the temptation to puke her guts up and eventually the pounding in her head subsided and her vision swam back into focus.That was it.Time to go home.

`Better?' the Doctor asked and she nodded, not quite having the breath to speak.

Peri carried on breathing in huge gulps of the blessedly cool air as the Doctor knelt down to pick something up. He smiled as he brought his hand up to watch as one of the spiders crawled over his hand:Thank you my little friend. I think you may have saved our lives' He let the spider drop to the ground on a silvery thread and watched it scuttle away before turning to Peri with a concerned look:I think it's time we got you home'

Peri couldn't have agreed more and got to her feet. It was only then that she took in her surroundings properly. She stopped dead in her tracks.

Òh my...'

`Beautiful, isn't it?'The Doctor stood a few feet away, a knowing grin on his face.

They stood on a vast plane, grassland rolling down a gentle slope to where the blue smudge of the waiting TARDIS sat. Night had fallen whilst they'd been running around in the complex below, and the plane was dotted with glowing balls of different colours. It looked as if somebody had dropped a lorry load of carnival lights. She looked over at the Doctor, who knew what she was about to ask.

`You'll only find flowers like this on N'Tia.The locals call them Pilgrim's Lantern. The petals of the flower absorb the light of the sun during the day, excreting the ultra-violet rays at night:

`They're gorgeous,' she breathed.

The night sky twinkled with more stars than she'd ever seen, forming a halo and a purple, green planet hung like a very large and very expensive dinner plate above them.

`N'Tia's fourth moon,' the Doctor explained.

A streak of brilliant red flame flared across the sky, the trail

shimmering into a red snowstorm before fading.

Was that a shooting star?' Peri asked with hopeful excitement.

Ì'm afraid not. It was probably a cargo transport firing its warp engine, but just as impressive: The Doctor walked over to where Peri gazed into the heavens, a wide smile refusing to leave her face as she took in the beauty all around. He pulled her back to the here and now by dropping his hat onto her head. It was several sizes too big.

Peri giggled and pushed the hat back so she could see the Doctor. '

`Yes?' the Doctor arched an eyebrow.

She stopped, thinking for a second. She was countless light years from home, standing beneath an impossibly beautiful sky on an alien planet with a man she barely new Less than twenty minutes ago, a robot had tried to crush her head for no other reason than she was there, not to mention the soldiers who had tried frying her into so much crispy wonton.And, if she was any judge, she guessed that there would be more ahead if she stayed aboard the TARDIS. She breathed in decisively

'I think I understand'

`Sometimes it's the light at the end of the tunnel that makes it all worthwhile:The Doctor watched as Peri knelt to gently pick one of the glowing flowers with deft skill. She had just started her new botanical collection.

The Doctor placed an arm round his companion's shoulders. A few seconds of friendly silence passed between them. 'Where to, Peri?'

Peri grinned. 'I think I'll leave that up to you:

The Doctor grinned back and they began to walk down the hill towards the waiting TARDIS.

Ìf we get a move on, we might catch the second test of the Ashes in nineteen eighty-one. Botham was on fine form that day.'

`Doctor... '

Tegan floats like a bubble in sea foam, surrounded by other bubbles,

stretching away in every direction, up, down, all around. The bubble

next door is a sister she never had, one gene's difference. She's wrapped

in *a ring of imaginary sisters, one step away in chance, in fate. Further*

away, brothers, cousins, ancestors, the foam of the ocean mapping out

the whole human race in a grid of genetic possibilities. Every

individual who ever could have existed. Only a tiny number of those

bubbles contain a real person. Only one contains Tegan.

She surfaces for just a moment, gulping for air. The Doctor is there, a firm hand on her shoulder, keeping her from flailing loose from the bed, the tight wrapping of blankets. She is painfully cold, not cold enough to be numb, cold enough to feel that she's turning into snow, flaking apart.

She's suffocating under an avalanche. Her thrashing weakens into twitching and she's back in the ocean.

The ocean pounds against the beach of lonely Flow; the forgotten colony,

rocks and sand and lifeless sea. The colonists plant tough crops in the

dunes, keep a few small fish in the lagoons.They have no way to kave·their

rockets were disposable, one use only, lying forgotten in the sand dunes. No

one visits them - not for ten years now. No one answers their radio signals.

What have they done to be cut off like this? Why have they been

thrown out of the galactic communi ty, teeming with colonies and

spacecraft? Even aliens won't talk to them.

There are no children under ten.

The TARDIS arrives beneath the shadows of the useless rockets.They stick out at an angle, like missiles, half-buried by drifting sand and clinging weeds. The Doctor has heard one of F-four's plaintive transmissions. He and Nyssa are already discussing possible biological tests as they make their way up the beach, shoes dragging in the sand.Tegan follows, left out and almost left behind.

balloons.Tiny The colony is little more than a ring of prefab domes, like half-buried gardens grow on their flattened roofs.As the three travellers arrive a pale rain is falling, trickling through the plants and running down the sides of the huts.

The colonists leak from their domes into the rain, afraid to speak, in case the triple vision vanishes.They're ghosts, pale in the thin sunlight, willowy in the weak gravity

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Ì'm sorry. We're not here to take you away. We don't know why you've been sent to Coventry:The Doctor gives a crook-toothed smile:We don't know why you can't have children:

`But we want to find out,' says Nyssa firmly.

Tegan's the third wheel here. All she knows about science comes from watching *The Curiosity Show* in the seventies. She can evacuate a jumbo jet with half its exits blocked by fire in ninety seconds flat, but you can fit her knowledge of biology into a salt shaker and still have plenty of room for the salt.

She's also been trained in how to handle people, how to calm and charm them, or how to get them to jump out of an aeroplane onto a rubber chute metres above the ground. So she sits with them, talks with them, gets them to open up. Over a simple vegetable stew, shared at a long table in the largest dome, they talk about their harsh life here, how they had to bring everything with them, their plans for the future put on hold while they wait and wait for pregnancies that never come.

After dinner that first night, the feeling disappears from the tips of her fingers, then from her feet, so she stumbles and sprawls in the thin yellow dust between the domes. Her stomach's an iceberg: she chunders mightily once, and then again. By the time the Doctor finds her and carries her off to the medical hut, the creeping cold has frozen her to the bone.

Tegan surfaces again. This time Nyssa is there, with a glass of water.

Chunks of ice float in the water. Frosted to the bone, Tegan tries to push it away with her chin, but Nyssa makes her drink a little of it. Broken glass seems to trickle into her throat.

The Doctor is saying, It's linked. It all has to be linked together. We can obviously rule out food poisoning - everyone ate the same stew.'

Nyssa's voice.`Could the crops have absorbed some toxin from the soil?

The colonists might have developed an immunity'

It might explain their sterility' ponders the Doctor:But there's nothing in their medical records about an illness like this at all. If they were never ill, how did they become immune?'

Ill start looking at once,' says Nyssa. She takes the painful glass away.

`Toopyar will help me get samples of all the crops.'

`Try every test you can think of. Pollution, viruses, anything at all. We know there was a civilisation here thousands of years ago. Perhaps the same thing destroyed them: Nyssa asks a question with her eyes:I'll stay here in the medical dome with Tegan, he answers.

Tegan can't judge the passage of time. She doesn't know how long it's been when she next hears a male voice in the room.'Who'd do something like this to us? We've never hurt anyone. We're not a Mayflower colony, 102

we've got no enemies. We asked specifically for a world with no native intelligences. It doesn't make any sense'

Nyssa says, 'I don't know why either, Toopyar. But whoever is responsible, they've been extremely thorough. There isn't a food crop on F-four that doesn't produce the contraceptive. The genes must have been inserted into the seeds supplied to you in that final shipment, ten

years ago'

`Well why would that make *her* sick?' He means Tegan. He sounds panicked.

Nyssa says, 'Some sort of allergy? I don't know.'

Ìt doesn't matter. All we have to do is fast: Toopyar insists. 'How long would we have to stop eating?'

Ì have to do more tests'

`Tell me!'

'I think the contraceptive is also designed to stop a pregnancy if it did occur.' Nyssa is distressed; her science has got nothing but bad news for him:As soon as the mother began to eat again, she'd miscarry.'A long and painful pause. Àren't there any native food sources?'

À few weeds. Nothing we can live on.You can get the gene out of our crops, can't you?' He knows she can do it. `You can make them safe to eat again'

`The Doctor and I will do everything we can. Can I get a blood sample from you?'

Àbsolutely.'

Tegan floats again, drifting across the ocean in her bed of foam.

Somewhere in the great grid of humanity, the colonists of F-four must be floating too; a little lattice of families, surrounded by empty places in the grid.All the children they're never going to have.

There are other things in the foam. Things that skittle and creep, bristling with clever limbs. She gets only glimpses of them, pushing through the sea foam, working their way towards the beach.

When she emerges once more she knows there's an emergency.

Everything except her bed has been pushed against the door.The Doctor is looking back and forth from her to the window of the little dome.

`Come out, Doctor: calls someone. 'You're taking us off this doomed world. Now.'

Ì'm sorry. I can't do that: He glances at Tegan, wondering if she's aware of what's happening around her.

`How do we know you're not part of the conspiracy?' calls the voice.

The Doctor calls out, `Tegan is very ill.There's a genetically engineered virus in her bloodstream. But it's not present in any of the food she ate'

`Come out and we'll talk about it.'

`The same virus is present in Toopyar's blood. It may well be present in each and every one of youll'hink!' shouts the Doctor `Tegan would already be dead, if it weren't for the advanced medical supplies from my ship. I can't take any of you anywhere until we know what's happening!'

Àdmit it. You were sent here to check up on us."That's Nyssa's friend, Toopyar:To make sure we haven't found some way to get out.'

`Don't be ridiculous' That's Nyssa - she's not inside the dome, have they got her, out there? 'The Doctor and I have been trying to help'

`The best way you can help us is to *get us out of here:* The stuff stacked against the door comes clattering down.

Tegan drifts after the scuttling legs, the cunning eyes. Their ship's deep in the water, hidden from human scans. They push through the surf and up onto the thin sand, limbs already twisting at the canisters they've brought.

A fine dust rises from the open containers, like smoke. The air picks it up, turning it into whorls and curls, curving upwards and then disappearing into the sky. The dust will float across the air, each speck powered by sunlight, a tiny laboratory unfolding into countless billions of infectious particles. Each speck will rain down softly into the soil and water, spreading its toxic load.

Narrow limbs, eyes at their tips, dabble safely in the smoky dust as it rises, making patterns, amused. The infection will affect one species, and one species only. It won't kill the first ones it touches, oh no; they won't even know they've been contaminated. They'll carry the stuff home like poisoned chalices and this part of the galaxy will belong to the Creators forever

Tegan surfaces, alone. The door to the dome is open.

She rolls out of the bed, leaving behind her tight swaddling, and clambers over all the junk on the floor.

They're holding a meeting in the largest dome. Walking there seems to take forever. It probably takes thirty seconds. She can't judge how close the dome is, or how far away. She just stumbles along until her hands catch the edge of the door frame.

They're all in there, the pallid, weedy colonists, bullying the Doctor and Nyssa.Tegan bangs her fist against the thin wall of the dome to get their attention.

`Shut up and listen,' she says, through a mouthful of ice. 'How does it all fit together? I'm glad you asked.'They stare at her, as though a zombie has shrugged its way out of a sandy grave to confront them:Someone put the disease here before you even arrived. They saw you coming, and thought, 104

"We'll fix up these bastards."You wouldn't get sick.You'd just soak up all that virus, and then take it home to Earth'

`Carriers: says Nyssa, staring at Tegan. "That's why the virus was in Toopyar's blood, but he'd never been ill:

Ì caught the bug from one of you, not from the food,' Tegan wheezes.

Her lungs are frosting over:That's why no one wants to talk to you.That's why you can't have any kids. Cause they'd only catch it from you and die.

Don't you get it?' The colonists are staring at her, frozen. They realised; Earth realised what had happened. So they sent you those special seeds.

They cut you off.'

At once the crowd shatters into tears and fury:Why didn't they tell us?'

`Who? Who seeded our world with the virus?' Why didn't they just tell us?' This is an outrage."How does she know?' I don't believe a word of it'

Ìt's a death trap! We've got to get out of here!' What about our rights?

We should have been consulted!' She's babbling. It's the fever. I don't believe it'

Tegan sinks down on the edge of the stage.The Doctor is there, putting his coat around her. His voice cuts across the babble. 'Everything Tegan says matches what our tests have found'

"They should have told us,' someone *insists*. 'They should have consulted us."We're just supposed to die off quietly. Without any fuss' `The Draconians. It could have been the Draconians. Or the Daleks."They're only here to convince us to keep quiet!' It's Earth politics - one less colony to cause them trouble! There must be something here they want!

Minerals!' It's bioprospecting. They wanted to see if something on this planet would stop their virus killing us!'

The Doctor speaks up again. 'What's been done to you is wrong.

Terrible. But don't you see - it doesn't change anything. You still can't leave. As soon as you come into contact with other human beings, you'll start a plague that could wipe out half the galaxy.'

`Why should we take your word for it?'

`Look at her!' says the Doctor, and Tegan knows he means her. 'If it wasn't for the medicines from the TARDIS, she'd already be dead.Think of a million people with the virus.A million million That's what you're asking me to do!'

Tegan sees flashing metal from the corners of her eyes, glued half-closed by cold. She hasn't got any words left, no more revelations: she's just a cooling corpse.They've all got guns, even the teenagers:Either you take our representatives off; says someone, 'or all three of you die, right now:

The Doctor and Nyssa share a look. 'I've got to get Tegan back to the TARDIS; he murmurs:Two of you can come with me. No more:

* * *

Half the colony follows them as far as the beach.The Doctor has Tegan in his arms, an awkward bundle. The pair of representatives follow him to the half-buried rockets. They stare at the TARDIS. It doesn't look like much; the Doctor says, `but it got us here:

The representatives gesture with their guns. Ì have to get Tegan inside first; says the Doctor.

`We all go in: bullies one of the colonists.

`Don't be ridiculous. We won't all fit, will we?'

They wait, guns trained at Nyssa.

Tegan hears the familiar sound of the console room, like a mother humming to her baby, or a cat purring. The Doctor puts her down on an old cane chair, gently. A few moments later he presses a wide plastic jug into her hands, a plastic straw sticking out:Can you drink?'

Think so she wheezes.

`Drink as much as you can; he says.

She hears the TARDIS dematerialising, and swallows the stuff hard.

`Nyssa?'

The Doctor opens the scanner and makes a few adjustments.The view outside shows a mountain range, then zooms over and past it, back to the beach, just a few kilometres away.

Tegan sees Nyssa talking to the two colonists. Their guns dangle in frightened, beaten hands. The Doctor used the self-destruct,' she's telling them:He'd rather have died than let you spread the plague to the rest of the human race.'

`We'll kill you; one of them sobs.

`Why bother?' says Nyssa sharply.Then,Ì can still help you.There might be a chance. I'm stranded here too, now, remember.'

`Why didn't they tell us?'That's Toopyar:Why didn't they just tell us?'

Nyssa says, not unkindly, 'Perhaps because they were afraid you'd do exactly what you just tried to'

Tegan is still clutching the jug. The stuff is like hot, flat lemonade; she can feel it streaming around inside her. Even her toes feel warm. It's working:She's not really going to stay with them, is she?'

The Doctor puts a hand to Tegan's forehead, and smiles 'She'll make her way here as soon as it's dark - it's only half a day's walk. We

agreed on this rendezvous in case they tried to force us to take the TARDIS. Now: sleep'

So Tegan is half-dreaming when Nyssa arrives. She is vaguely aware Nyssa's back early. 'I didn't have to wait for nightfall. They let me go'

`What happened?' says the Doctor.

`They realised you'd only moved the TARDIS. Toopyar said you'd never have taken Tegan inside.'

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`They checked the tests for themselves and realised it was all true.

Everything Tegan said. The planet was seeded as a trap for humanity long before they arrived.'

The Doctor says, Hmm.This century saw some very bad behaviour from the competing space-faring races. How do you estimate the chances of a cure?'

`Zero: says Nyssa. Her voice is pricked by the edge of tears. 'Over time, the alien virus has incorporated itself into every chromosome. It's like a booby trap - try to remove it, and their entire genetic structure will simply tear itself apart. Doctor, they have no hope. No hope at all!

Her voice is fading, as Tegan floats again on the sea.This time it's warm, her breathing easy, letting go into healing. But she sees the grid of humanity all around her in the bubbles, sees the colonists locked into their lonely comer.There's no evacuation for them, no jump-slide get away fast. Ng contact with new people, ever again. No new people. No children, ever. They are trapped in the genetic space, a cul-de-sac, a dusty corner, a dead end.

Nyssa says, 'They set one condition for letting me go:

`What's that?' says the Doctor.

Just as Tegan floats down into real sleep, Nyssa says, `They don't want to be forgotten. They want us to tell their story, to anyone who'll listen'

Ì will: murmurs Tegan, as she goes under.

And so she does.

House

Jeremy Daw

The bedroom was quiet and dark Jennifer could not see the brightly coloured pictures on the soft pink walls, nor hear the jolly tunes of Rooster Ron and his Band of Barnyard Buskers trill reassuringly from the rainbow ceiling.

It was well past her bedtime .The lights had been turned out a long time ago, leaving the walls and rainbow ceiling cloaked in darkness. On some nights, when the night had swallowed the walls, Jennifer imagined her bed was a boat, sailing on a sea of inky shadows with only her imagination **to** guide her.

But not tonight...

Jennifer knew she should be asleep. She *was* very tired, after all, and she didn't want to be grumpy and ill-tempered in the morning. But, try as she might, she just couldn't bring herself to forget.

She stared intently at the fizzy patterns on her screwed tight eyelids. It wasn't Roger. Oh, he'd been mean to her all day - just like he always was

- calling her names, laughing at her when she'd fallen over in the living room. But she could forget Roger. He was just a boy. She could even forget Emily and her bossy busybody pudgy face with its cold cruel eyes. She didn't like Emily and sometimes she could be very very mean, but she'd found that she didn't have to remember her unkindnesses. Not if she didn't want to.

No, what she couldn't forget was the sound that she'd heard a few moments ago. In the quiet of her bedroom, it had seemed unnaturally loud

- a crackling, rustling sound that had seemed to come from the foot of her **bed.** *She* didn't know what it was, but she knew she didn't want to hear **it** again.

As soon as she'd heard it, she'd pulled her knees up tight against her chest, closing her eyes, hoping, wishing that the sound would go away. She didn't know exactly how long it had been since she first heard the sound, but she was beginning to wonder if she could open her eyes and perhaps even get up to turn the light on.

Something rustled a couple of metres in front of her. It was a bold, uncaring noise, indifferent to her fear. Jennifer scrunched her eyes tighter and the pinpricks of light dancing on her eyelids exploded into fluorescent blobs of colour. She thought she recognised the sound now

She thought she knew.

The hissing, fizzing crackle was the heartless laughter of pirates 109

marauding on the sea of shadows. It was the sound of invisible hands slowly tearing brightly coloured pictures from soft pink walls. It was the sound of crumpled, trampled, broken things.

Jennifer felt her heart flutter in her chest like a bird trying to escape

its cage. Her mouth was dry; she couldn't swallow. She was scared she might wet the bed. That would be awful. Roger could be so mean about things like that.

Something rustled again, closer to her this time. She thought she could smell something too - an odd smell, crisp and sharp in her nostrils. She thought she heard someone whisper her name. She knew something was standing over her, watching her. She could feel the insistent pressure of its presence. Why couldn't she open her eyes and make it go away?

Jennifer,' someone said, softly. `You've been such a naughty, naughty girl.'

She wanted to scream, to run away, to cry out for help, but she did none of those things. What she did do was force her eyes open and stare at the intruder...

There was nothing there, just the familiar night-dark room, with its hidden rainbow ceiling and its soft pink walls. Then the nothing touched her face with a crackling hissing sound and Jennifer was gone.

Ì've decided I'd like to leave'

The gleaming white walls, their circular design a blank audience to her pronouncement, absorbed Peri's words, making her voice seem hollow and dull, barely audible above the irritating ever-present background hum of the TARDIS. Not the best of starts. Just as well this was a practice. But if she couldn't sound convincingly assertive to herself, what chance would she have in confronting the Doctor face to face?

It didn't help that her rehearsal was taking place in her bedroom. Its decor, like much of the TARDIS, was plain, uniform and thoroughly unexceptional. There were the obligatory roundels, of course, but even the furniture, which appeared to be made of pine and bamboo, seemed insipid and lacklustre. And the things that *did* make the room stand out from the rest of the ship weren't even hers.

She turned to survey the curios and keepsakes that hung from the mirrors of the dressing table and cluttered the bedside cabinets. The aboriginal beads and bracelets, the exquisitely worked ruby brooch, the fragile-looking, yet incredibly robust, miniature chess set - these all meant something to someone, but they meant nothing to her. Whoever she'd inherited this bedroom from had had a greater

opportunity to stamp their personality on the room and make it a *home.*

When she'd first joined the TARDIS, the Doctor had given her a sketchy tour of the essential areas of the ship. On the way, he'd flung open door after door, thrusting his head inside and tutting 110

disapprovingly to himself, until, on about the fifth attempt, he'd 'ahhed '

knowingly and announced that the room within was to be hers for the duration of her stay on board. It didn't seem to matter or even register with him that the room had been someone else's. At the time, she hadn't been that concerned. She had figured she could add her own little touches in time, but that just hadn't happened.And now it looked like it never would.

Of course, the Doctor's regeneration hadn't helped either. Although he had settled into his new personality after a short but frightening period of instability, the Doctor remained a distant, enigmatic figure, given to bold announcements and erratic mood swings - a far cry from the gentler, more pleasant person she'd met on Lanzarote. She got the distinct impression that even the TARDIS, with its maze-like system of corridors and its seemingly infinite collection of rooms (she'd even come across an old English tavern in one of her wanderings, but it had been dark and dusty and, with no one to accompany her, there had been no reason to stay), was too small for the Doctor to call home. She suspected that he would only ever deign to call the universe his 'home'. It was the only thing large enough to accommodate his ego...

Slowly, she wandered over to the dressing table. She picked up one of the trinkets from a crystal tray. It was a silver bracelet, inset with small red gems that seemed to glow with an inner fire as they caught the light. It was beautiful. What had it seen? How had it got here?

Ì guess I'm never gonna find out; she muttered.And then scowled.That kind of self-pity was exactly the sort of thing she was trying to change.

She dropped the bracelet back onto the dressing-table top and headed for the door.

`Doctor; she said to herself. 'I want to go home: She nodded assertively.

That was more like it. 'Doctor...' she began again, as she put her hand on the door handle.

The door flew towards her, taking her completely by surprise and almost spraining her wrist in the process.

The Doctor was beaming down at her his face a mixture of arrogant benevolence and boyish enthusiasm. Come along, Peri! We've landed: And with that, he marched off down the corridor, a blur of clashing calamitous colour.

Peri sighed, as she followed him to the console room.This was going to be harder than she'd thought.

Roger entered the dining room slowly, but with a quiet determination. He knew he was late, but he tried to act normally - to pretend that he hadn't kept the others waiting at the table.

`You're late!'

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Carl's voice was a whining needle of accusation, puncturing his resolve.

He frowned, as he sat down in the bright yellow chair that was the farthest point on the table from Carl's seat. He hated Carl with his fat piggish face and his horrid habit of lunging across the table for the jam tarts. He hated the yellow chair, too. Only yesterday, Andrew had been sick all over it - and not for the first time.

Roger reached for a sandwich, hoping that it wouldn't be beef paste. He took a cautious nibble and smiled. Tuna. He took a more generous bite and, munching happily, looked at the others.

There was Andrew, of course. Poor sickly Andrew, his face pale and clammy. He took shallow sips from his plastic cup, every so often wiping his thin lips on his sleeve. Andrew looked like he wasn't eating properly again. Which meant more jam tarts for Roger when the sandwiches were finished - provided Carl didn't get to them first.

Roger took another tuna sandwich, even though he hadn't finished the one already on his plate. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see Emily looking at him carefully. He didn't care. Andrew wasn't eating his share, was he? Emily was always telling them not to waste their food. Roger scowled fiercely. Emily was always telling them not to do lots of things.

Just because she was older than them And because she was a *girl.*

The tuna was very nice, though; Roger was even considering eating the crusts Emily *would* be pleased. A strange thought struck him It was so strange, he forgot to keep chewing and the semi-solid tuna sandwich began to dribble slowly out of one corner of his mouth.

Emily was glaring at him now She was on the verge of saying something scathing and hurtful, but Roger didn't care about that. The thought that had struck him was strange, but what was strange about it was that he hadn't thought it before.

Èrs

er...' he mumbled indistinctly

`You are a very rude and naughty boy,' announced Emily with an air of finality that was meant to signal an end to Roger's troublesome behaviour.

Quickly Roger swallowed the mulch in his mouth, now tasteless and bland compared to the excitement churning in his stomach.

Jennifer!' he blurted out. 'Where's Jennifer?'

There was a strange silence for a moment Emily, who had evidently been about to issue a more severe reprimand, looked round the table with a stunned expression. Andrew nervously fiddled with the paper tablecloth in front of him, looking upset. Carl had momentarily halted the progress of the tuna sandwich in his hand towards his mouth. He turned to stare at Roger and then said, simply, 'Who's Jennifer?'

Roger was worried. Even the cheerful murals on the walls of the Big Playroom couldn't lift his mood. He looked around the Playroom as if

seeing it for the first time. Plastic crates crammed to the brim with toys and games leant against the walls in haphazard piles. In one brightly coloured corner, was the interactive console, but Roger didn't feel like playing today.

Something was wrong, but he didn't know what. Andrew hadn't said anything at the dinner table and he hadn't eaten anything either. Emily had fussed and tutted, scowling at Roger for causing an upset and Carl had just repeated that he didn't know anyone called Jennifer and that Roger was silly. But Roger knew he wasn't silly.There *bad* been a Jennifer, hadn't there?

There were five of them in the house. He knew that. Five bedrooms on the second floor. Five places at the dining table. Five beanbags in the Big Play...

Roger froze and looked round the Big Playroom again. Sitting in a rough semi-circle on the floor, so that all the children could see the giant FunScreen on the far wall, were the five beanbags. Red for Emily. Purple for Andrew. Blue for Carl. Yellow for Roger. And red for Jennifer... No. Red was for Emily, wasn't it?

Roger swallowed. Surely he could count to five, couldn't he?

Red for Emily. Purple forAndrew. Blue for Carl.And he was yellow and...

There was a sound from across the hallway. It was a sound Roger hadn't really heard before. It reminded him a little bit of a laugh or perhaps the sound Carl sometimes made when he banged his knee on the dining table. But it was louder and more urgent, somehow.

There it was again! Roger left the Big Playroom and went to see what was happening in the Learnroom.

The Learnroom was the place in which all the children in the house had their daily lessons. Sometimes they counted; sometimes they read or wrote; sometimes they made things with plasticine and string. Today they had made space rockets that swooped down on alien planets and fired bright missiles at things. But today's lessons were over.There should have been no one in the Learnroom till tomorrow.

Roger heard the strange sound again as he opened the door. He recognised it as Emily's voice, but the confidence that usually characterised it was entirely absent. Roger quickly understood why.

Emily was standing by one of the learnstations at the far end of the room. Roger couldn't see her face, but he could see her body shaking and he could hear the small sobbing sounds she was making.

He moved further into the room and saw what Emily's body had initially hidden. Lying on the learnstation table was Andrew. Or at least...

Èmily" whispered Roger, his voice strained as the horror of what he was seeing began to strike him. 'What's happened to Andrew?'

Emily turned her tear-streaked face towards him and her movement revealed the full extent of Andrew's injury.

There was something horribly wrong with Andrew's body. Roger tried hard, but it was difficult to make out exactly where it now ended. It was clear, however, that much of its lower half was missing.

Roger swallowed. Emily was moving towards him, shaking her head over and over again. There was red everywhere - not the colour of the Playroom beanbag or of jam tarts on the dining table, but a deep, dark, old red.

Andrew?' he asked, plaintively 'Andrew, are you all right?'

Emily made that odd noise again, high-pitched and incoherent. It struck something deep within him and a horrible feeling began to build in the pit of his stomach until his whole body was throbbing with panic.

Andrew?' And there were tears in his eyes and something choking his throat. He swallowed again and Emily was sitting on the floor and crying and crying and crying...

`Now, what's all the fuss... Oh, good grief!'

Roger turned to the doorway and saw two strangers there, their mouths open in shock and distress.They were a man and a woman. Roger looked hard at them. The man was dressed in an exciting and colourful costume of some kind, all bold lines and clownish colours.The woman was dressed in a quieter, but still striking, lilac suit.

The strangers began to move into the Learnroom carefully, as if the grey plastic trays ranged along the walls might explode.

Roger glanced at Emily, still sitting on the floor. She was looking at the strangers intently, as if she couldn't quite believe they were there. He looked up as the man came to stand in front of him

`Hello,' he said, politely - just like he'd always been told. 'Hello, Daddy.'

And he hugged the strange man fiercely, as the tears finally came.

At least they hadn't been shot at yet, Peri reflected, as she and the Doctor looked into yet another bedroom decorated in strong primary

colours and sporting a ceiling that almost had as many colours as the Doctor's coat.

The TARDIS had landed about five minutes ago, further up this lushly carpeted hallway and Peri, at first cautious and uneasy, had realised that, for once, the TARDIS seemed to have deposited them somewhere relatively safe and devoid of monstrous aliens intent on killing, dissecting and/or torturing her. She should be grateful, she supposed. But, she was beginning to find the soft pastel green of this hallway and the series of brightly decorated bedrooms... well, boring. Obviously, whoever lived here had a lot of kids. Well organised kids, too.

She remembered her own bedroom in the house in Baltimore. It had

never been that tidy. Toys, books and clothes had usually ended up in a jumble on the floor once she'd done with them. The ritual nagging from her mother would invariably restore her room to a semblance of order for a short while, before it became more fun to play or read or dress up than look at rows of tidy drawers and the empty space of the bedroom floor just crying to be filled with invention and fun. Peri smiled wistfully.

Now ***tbat's*** interesting!'

Peri realised that the Doctor had entered the room while she'd been daydreaming. She joined him by the bed, which seemed to have some kind of anthropomorphised chicken prancing across its duvet cover.

Ìt's a chicken, Doctor. Very interesting, I know, but I come from the land of Donald Duck and Bugs Bunny. Believe me, stuff like this,' and her expansive gesture took in the duvet, its matching pillowcase and the curtains draped across the large window opposite them, 'isn't exactly ground-breaking

:

The Doctor scowled at her, but didn't respond to her directly. Instead, he bent over to peer at the pillow intently 'And who's been sleeping in this bed?' he muttered.

Peri gave the Doctor a look that took in his muscular frame and tightly curled hair. 'Well, you could audition for the part of Goldilocks if you want, Doctor, but I really don't think...'

Ùse your eyes, Peri!' admonished the Doctor with more than a hint of exasperation. Less than graciously, he moved aside to give Peri the chance to examine the rooster-adorned pillowcase more closely

She quickly understood what had grabbed the Doctor's attention.There was a shallow, but nonetheless distinct, indentation in the pillow. Just to the left of it something shone in the soft light diffused from the ceiling.

Peri picked it up carefully and held it out to the Doctor. In her hand was

a single strand of steel grey hair.

The Doctor took it and slipped it into his pocket. Not belonging to the occupant of this room?' he asked.

Peri shuddered. 'This is getting creepy'

`Creepy?'The Doctor was evidently about to castigate her for her over-sensitivity to the situation, but thought better of it. What do you notice about this house, Peri?'

`There's no one about?'

`So far.'

Ìt's for lots of kids.'

At least three - possibly more. We're almost at the end of this hallway, **but** I think there are a couple of doorways we haven't investigated yet: Èrm... it's very tidy?' Peri shrugged. It was weak, but it was all she had **left.**

The Doctor, however, didn't disparage her suggestion, as she'd half

expected. He just gave her a thoughtful look and then gazed slowly around the room. 'Why aren't there any windows?' he asked.

Peri looked nonplussed and then pointed at the curtains on the opposite wall. 'What do you call that?'

But the Doctor had already anticipated her and, in two long strides, had reached the other side of the room. With a dramatic flourish, he thrust the curtains apart.

Peri felt a momentary sensation of vertigo. The wall in front of her was utterly black. She moved to the Doctor's side, seeing her reflection distort and merge with his and then break up in the dizzying void only to reform again in yet another grotesque version of herself.

`What... ?'

`Plasma Coil Holographic Projection System. Widely used for transmission of visual data on Earth and its colonies in the mid twenty-third and early twenty-fourth centuries. Which tells us more accurately when we are.And perhaps where: The Doctor turned to face Peri, a ghost of a smug smile haunting his features. 'But it's not a window. Which tells us what?'

Ì don't know. Maybe the children here are allergic to sunlight or something:

The Doctor nodded slowly. An interesting hypothesis, but I prefer the more straightforward one. I think...'

Somewhere below them, someone screamed.

Now what's all the fuss... Oh, good grief!'

There was something wrong with what she was seeing.The room was, like the rest of the house, decorated with children in mind. It was clear, however, that it was some sort of schoolroom, the information sheets on the wall featuring the same cartoon characters she'd seen in the bedrooms. Much of the space in the room was taken up with four large grey plastic desks, each one divided into a flat durable work area and a computer console with large child-friendly coloured switches and keys.

There was a body sprawled across one of the grey desks, its blood pooling stickily on the thin functional carpet.There was someone crying on the floor beside it. And there was someone turning to face them, his eyes brimming with unshed tears and something else... something akin to awe or wonder.

Peri gasped. Because, in the middle of this room - this house - so obviously designed for children, and wearing a set of pyjama-style overalls that sported that damned rooster on chest and sleeves, was a grown man.

An old man, his face lined, his wiry hair a greyish white.An old man, whose eyes gazed in disbelieving adoration at the Doctor even as he

took a series of little stumbling steps towards him, hugged him and called him...

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... Daddy'

The Doctor at least had the good grace to look embarrassed. With a remarkable gentleness, he extricated himself from the other man's embrace and caught him by the chin, raising the old man's face so he could see into his eyes.

Ì'm sorry' he said, softly Ì'm sure your father was a good man, but I'm not him. Now why don't you sit down and tell me what's going on.'

It's Andrew!' The woman sitting on the floor seemed a little younger than the man. She was certainly larger, her brown hair streaked with grey and tied in a pair of ludicrous bunches that hung either side of her broad face. Ì think something terrible's happened to him.'

How could he have been so foolish? It was obvious really, when he thought about it. The smoothness of the skin. The unlined face and rich tightl icurled

hair. How could he have mistaken this strange, yet kind, man for his father?

Roger didn't understand what was going on. So much had changed in the last few hours. He couldn't begin to comprehend what had happened to Andrew. He seemed to have suffered some sort of accident, but, unlike the time Emily had cut her finger on a cracked plastic chair, he wasn't going to get better.

He kept on thinking of what the tall stranger had said. Something about them all being in terrible danger. But worst of all was what the smaller stranger had said, the woman.

`How long have you been living here?'

He had just stared blankly at her. She had swallowed nervously 1 mean, don't you have any idea how long you've been here, like this?

Did you really come to this house as children?'

Roger had felt a sense of rising panic. `But we *are* children! We are children *now!* Aren't we?'

The woman had just looked away. When she turned back, she didn't seem able to look him in the eye any more. Ì'd best go and see what the Doctor's doing; she'd mumbled.

`What's going on?'

Roger looked up to see that Carl had entered the room. 'Hello, Carl, he began. `Something's...' Roger couldn't begin to explain what had happened in the last few minutes.

Carl's eyes widened at the sight of the two strangers. 'Who are they?'

Roger sighed. They're grown-ups... I think... they're here to help' He looked at Carl, thoughtfully 'Where have you been?'

Once again, Roger found his gaze being avoided. 'I was tired so I went to rest in my room.'

Roger saw the telltale dusting of crumbs on the other man's shirt and

the smear of strawberry jam around his mouth. He had always suspected that Carl had somehow been hoarding jam tarts in the dining room. It didn't seem to matter now He just nodded slowly

Àndrew's been hurt; he said evenly, although the words sounded hollow to him. 'I think something bad's happened'

Peri had brought a duvet down from one of the bedrooms and lowered it over the mutilated body on the desk. No one had seemed to want to move it.

She watched the occupants of the house carefully and with not a little fear. There was a weird disjunction of outward appearance and inward nature: the little, awkward movements; the bold, intuitive moments of revelation; the lack of emotional restraint. It reminded her of her grandma as the dementia had set in. The tantrums and petty childishness had seemed shocking at first, but even then there had been flashes of lucidity

- events from the past recalled with startling clarity. But, *these* old people were different, somehow. They seemed to believe they were children.

They had no sense of history to cling onto.

The Doctor came towards her, hands thrust in pockets, frowning.

`What's going on here, Doctor?'

He draped what was meant to be a reassuring arm around her shoulder.

Peri shivered. Now she knew they were in trouble.

`Care to test a hypothesis with me?'

Roger watched the strangers leave the room. He wondered where they were going. Perhaps, they were leaving and going back to where they came from. He had the feeling he was missing something, had *forgotten* something.

Emily tapped his shoulder in a typically forthright and decisive manner.

Ìt's supper time!' she announced, brightly.

The Doctor led her up to the second floor, the one they'd landed on. At the end of the hallway was the TARDIS, its cracked battered blue shell somehow more real than the soft green wallpaper. Peri felt a pang of yearning in the pit of her stomach. Whatever else it was, the TARDIS was a respite from despair and terror, from the moments when you were sure you were walking through somebody else's nightmare, from moments like *this*.

The Doctor walked up to it and, for a bitter-sweet instant, Peri thought he was going to open the door, beckon her in and take her away. He didn't, though. He kept walking past the TARDIS to stand in front of the wall some three feet behind it.

Ah-hah

Peri watched as he produced a small knife from his coat pocket and

began to cut a large rectangle in the wallpaper. When he had finished, he began to pick vigorously at the paper, some of which came off in wide strips, while other sections remained more stubbornly attached to the wall.

Àte you going to just stand there, Peri, or are you actually going to make yourself useful?'

Peri moved forward to help peel off some of the more willing fragments of paper. 'I don't see how offering to redecorate their charming little house is going to help; she muttered sullenly

The Doctor's quick movements didn't falter as he began to talk. 'Do you remember I asked you why there were no windows in this "charming little house" and you said that the children might be allergic to sunlight?

And I said there was another, more plausible, explanation? In the TARDIS, do you remember why I said we couldn't get an exact fix on our local co-ordinates?'

Peri scowled. 'You said it was something to do with background radiation, combined with... Oh, I don't know, Doctor. That was ages ago.

I've seen a bunch of old people who think they're kids and a legless body since then. My memory's not too good when I'm under stress, you know...'

`Combined with localised spatial anomalies I said: The Doctor grunted as a particularly stubborn piece of paper funny gave way to his exertions.

Peri began to notice that there was something very odd about the wall underneath the paper. 'Where did the adults go, do you think?'

Òh, come on, Doctor! Have you seen the 'kids' here? Any adults that were with them would have died and... been replaced, surely?'

The Doctor turned to look at her 'I don't think there were ever any adults here, Per Only children:

`Doctor:

`Hmmm?`

"this isn't a wall, is it?'

Roger followed Emily and Carl into the dining room. It was on the ground floor and consequently had taken them all some time to reach, but the journey had been a strangely quiet one. Emily had tried to keep up a sense of normality by telling Carl not to eat all the chocolate biscuits, but Carl had just mumbled his acquiescence and her mood of enforced jollity quickly dried up.

Now they were all sat round the table in their colour-coded chairs - red for Emily, blue for Carl and yellow for Roger.

The table was covered with a nice new shiny plastic sheet. Rooster Ron danced and cavorted round the edges in a series of stylised images, while tumblers of milk and plates of biscuits waited for them in the centre.

Emily reached across and took a custard cream, nibbling primly. Carl and Roger sipped their milk in silence.

At last, Roger said quietly, 'Why isn't there a space for Andrew?'

Carl began to shake his head unhappily. Emily stopped nibbling and put her biscuit down carefully on the shiny plastic tablecloth.

`There should be a place for Andrew,' continued Roger, earnestly.

Andrew's chair was purple. Why isn't it here?'

Emily sighed as if Roger was being very stupid. 'Well,Andrew isn't here, is he?'

`No. No, it's a door.'

Peri folded her arms across her chest. 'How did you know that was there?'

The Doctor straightened up and the knife disappeared into his pocket.

`The history of Earth's colonisation period is an interesting, albeit messy, one. It's funny how, with hindsight and a modicum of smug superiority, you can detect patterns in the historical record'

`You haven't answered my question'

Ìn a moment' The Doctor's face had taken on a distant, almost mournful, expression. 'When you left the Earth, two great superpowers were locked in a potentially apocalyptic nuclear political battle.You'll be happy to know that the Earth wasn't destroyed at the end of the twentieth century, but, two or three hundred years later, one of its colonies wasn't so lucky

'Oh, it started for different reasons, but round about the year twenty-three ten, the Earth colony on Eldair found itself in a situation very

similar to the one its mother world had endured in the mid- to late twentieth century. One faction on the large southern continent favoured exploitation of the planet's vast mineral resources and started strip-mining that continent, and the southern pole, on a massive scale. The faction that occupied the two smaller continents in the north and the large archipelago of islands in the eastern sea was vehemently opposed to this policy, favouring a more agrarian approach. Both sides, entrenched in their ideologies and supplied by numerous and persuasive off-world military corporations, built up a huge arsenal of conventional and nuclear weapons'

Peri just stared at the Doctor. 'You're telling me they actually wiped each other out?'

The Doctor nodded. 'Oh, they hadn't *meant* to. Mutually assured destruction is never high on the list of viable options when you're a political leader. But there was a moment of crisis - an incursion into disputed territory I think. It doesn't really matter. The leaders of the southern continent made the tragic mistake of believing their rhetoric of 120

superior power. They pushed the button and their enemies felt they had no choice but to retaliate. With automatic computer programmes devised for just such a contingency, the sky was black with missiles before anyone could even begin to think about their actions.The planet was devastated'

`Then we're...'

'... In some kind of shelter, specifically designed for the children of those wealthy and powerful enough to afford and warrant it.The situation would have been tense, of course, but there was no knowing for certain when the catastrophic moment would come. You're a politician or a general. You've got a job to do. You've got to be visible, you've got to be seen. But, your children? Now that's a different matter. What better investment for the future of the world than to hide your children away deep underground where no one - nothing - could harm them?'

`Then why are they still here? And why are they being harmed now?'

Roger stared at Emily, disbelievingly. `How can you say that, Emily? Andrew was our friend and now he's gone and his chair's gone and you're acting like it doesn't matter and I hate you!'

He was quivering now, all the confusion of the last hour fuelling his

anger. 'I hate you, Emily! With your nice little smile and your stupid stupid hair! I hate you, because you don't care about anyone else. Just yourself.

I...' Roger stopped. Emily was crying and Carl was staring uncomfortably at the rim of his tumbler. All of a sudden, he felt tired. He slumped back into his chair and rubbed his hand across his eyes.

'I...' he began.

*Hello,' someone said.

Ì don't know,' said the Doctor. 'But I've got some fairly unpleasant ideas'

And with that, he braced himself against the TARDIS and kicked. Hard.

Carl looked up sharply.

`Did you hear something?' he asked.

Roger looked carefully at Emily, who was still sobbing into her hands. It was hard to feel sorry for her. Ì don't know,' he said, slowly.

Carl leaned forward gingerly to tap Emily's forearm. 'Emily? Emily, did you hear something just then?'

`Hello: someone said, again.

There was a brief rush of wind as the hidden door in the wall flew outwards. Beyond was a blackness deeper and more oppressive than that found in outer space. No stars illumined this gloom; nor was there any **sense** of vastness. There was only a deep, close, fetid dark and the old terrible scent of ancient earth.

The Doctor stood framed in the black rectangle for a moment and then he turned, closing the door behind him, his face grim.

`The law of diminishing returns,' he muttered. 'I think we're in trouble.'

'I heard it, then!' shouted Roger.

Even Emily peered up tearfully.

Carl looked afraid.

`Let's all play a game, someone said, pleasantly. 'Eeny, meeny, miney -

mo!'

Peri and the Doctor were already on their way downstairs when the screaming started.

Carl was crying and shrieking hysterically. Roger was whimpering, his hands rising involuntarily to cover his face. So much red. Red everywhere, dripping from the plastic tablecloth no longer clean now but still shining.

He could see his reflection in the glistening darkness Emily's face and chest had disappeared, vanishing with a sizzling pop, lopped off by an unseen knife. And the red had followed, a torrent of it, splashing over his face and clothes. Red. Red everywhere.

And someone somewhere was giggling.

Òh, no!'

Peri began to enter the dining room and then stopped. The Doctor barged past her, but then he would, taking charge, organising some sort of rational response to this carnage.

The two men were wiping away blood from their faces - Emily's blood, she realised, for it was her body that had pitched forwards onto the table, blood and matter pooling around it Emily's death had smashed all pretence of adulthood from their minds. Huge heaving sobs wracked the larger one's frame. Roger, the one she had spoken to, was rising from his seat, eyes darting around him wildly.

The Doctor grabbed him roughly 'Tell me!' he demanded earnestly. 'The food, the drink, your clothes - where does it all come from?'

She'd heard enough. 'Dear God, Doctor!' she screamed at him. 'Look around you! They can't help you - they're just kids!'

The Doctor turned to look at her, his face frozen in a thunderous scowl, but Roger was stammering now, his breathing slowing."Th... the house...

House provides.'

The Doctor shoved him roughly towards the door. 'Take him to the

TARDIS, Peri. Now.We've got to get out of here and we've got to take them with us.' He strode across to Carl who was still shaking uncontrollably, blood-streaked

fingers covering his eyes.

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Peri glanced at Roger. The old man's lined eyes were wide with confusion and shock. He took tiny uncertain steps towards her.

The Doctor looked up. `Go now, Peri!'

Peri reached forward and took the old man's hand.The contact seemed to startle him, but he looked into her eyes and she thought she saw some strength, some sort of understanding.

`Come on: she said, quietly in what she hoped was a reassuring manner.

'Let's go'

Roger stumbled up the stairs towards the second floor.The girl's hand was cool and smooth around his and, although she tugged him along when he faltered, she was never rude or disrespectful. He didn't know why she was taking him to the Sleeprooms, though. Didn't she realise there was nowhere to go?

Gasping for breath, he paused at the top of the stairs. There was something at the end of the landing he hadn't seen before.

Ìt's all right.' The girl smiled. 'It's just the TARDIS. It's bigger than it looks:

With a greater sense of urgency now, the girl dragged him towards the strange blue cabinet. He wondered what it could contain. For a moment, he experienced a sensation of excitement as if he was about to open a new toybox in the Big Playroom.They covered the few metres to the end of the hallway in a matter of moments.The girl fumbled in her pocket for the key that would unlock the cabinet.

Now he was closer to it, Roger noticed the chipped, scratched exterior and the opaque glass windows. How could this fragile thing help them?

But there was a faint humming sound coming from it. He'd never quite

heard anything like it before.

The girl - Peri, that was her name! - Peri had opened the door to the strange blue cabinet and Roger peered uncertainly into the darkness behind her.

`Hello,' someone said, politely. 'What are you doing?'

'Wh... who was that?'

Peri had dropped the TARDIS key when the voice had spoken. She bent down cautiously to pick it up. Roger was moving away from her, his head upturned towards the ceiling, face showing lines of concentration as well as age.

remember now!' He turned towards her, face beaming 'There were five of us - Emily, Jennifer, Andrew, Carl and me. We were to stay in the house until the grown-ups came back for us. And while they were gone, we'd all have a wonderful time eating jam tarts and custard creams and 123

drinking milk and fizzy pop and playing and learning and... and House would take care of us all!' He was shouting now, though whether from excitement at what he was saying or just delight at having remembered, Peri could not tell.

`We know that: she said, carefully, 'but someone's doing something horrible to you - it's not safe here anymore'

Roger's smile did not falter. If anything, it grew broader and broader.

È*verything will be all right now House is back' He looked up towards the ceiling. 'Aren't you, House?'

Behind Roger's grinning form, Peri saw the Doctor struggling up the stairs towards them, half carrying, half dragging Carl's bulky body with him.

'Why... aren't you already... in the TARDIS?' he grunted.

`Well, we're all here now; said the House, its voice seeming to come from somewhere above - or perhaps around? - them. Peri thought it sounded female, but it was difficult to tell:Isn't this nice?'

The Doctor let Carl fall gently to the floor. Peri saw that the man was still sobbing quietly. The Doctor stared at the ceiling, his expression

defiant.

`You have no right to do this!'

There was a pause and then the voice returned. 'But I was only playing!

That's all!'

Peri shuddered. There was something petulant in its tone now

`Playing? Playing?!? Is that what you call the murder of those entrusted to you?'

Òh, that was a long time ago. Such a long time ago. I remember the beginning. The fun in the Playroom, reading stories at bedtime. Such a long time... The voice had taken on a wistful tone and, as it did, its timbre changed until it began to sound more masculine. Peri swallowed, nervously.

Roger was nodding his head vigorously 'That's right! There was Suzy Starlight and Ben and Shep and Rooster Ron and... I remember!' He took a stumbling step towards the centre of the hallway. 'Tell me a story! Tell me a story!'

There was silence for a moment.The Doctor glanced at Peri and nodded meaningfully towards the open door of the TARDIS. She began to move slowly towards Roger.

Ì'm sorry, Roger: the voice said, sadly 'but I can't do that. I can't remember the stories anymore. Such a long time ... '

Roger looked upset, but he nodded. I understand: He looked up at Peri, his eyes glistening:Such a long time:

`You must stop this,' said the Doctor, quietly 'You must let them go:

`But then what would I do? What would my purpose be then? The Makers wanted the best for their children - only the best.They created me 124

to protect and provide for their children.That is my purpose, but... but...'

The voice giggled - a silly nervous, childish laugh. 'I just want to have some fun'

`You're mad, aren't you?' The Doctor's voice was a whisper now

`Somewhere in that silicon and filament that comprises your artificial intelligence, you've developed a dementia every bit as debilitating as that afflicting poor Roger here. Except yours is infinitely more dangerous.Your creators gifted you with a way to transform the surrounding earth and rock into food and clothing, and now you're turning it against them. But they're not your playthings!' He turned to Per 'Quick!'

Taking her cue from the Doctor, she grabbed Roger by the arm and began leading him towards the TARDIS. The Doctor moved towards Carl.

Peri was at the TARDIS door, when she heard the strangled cry of panic.

She and Roger turned to see the Doctor struggling with the older, but heavier, man. Carl's face was screwed tight in determination.

`No... Must stay!' he hissed, fiercely. 'I want to stay!'

The Doctor shouted over his shoulder:Roger, will you please explain to your friend here that he must come with us? It's the only way!'

Roger moved forward until he was standing next to the Doctor. It had gone very quiet. Only Carl's stifled sobs disturbed the silence. He reached down to put his hand on Carl's shoulder. He'd never really liked Carl. Too much selfishness and spite. But then, hadn't they all been like that?

Peri gasped as a large triangle of carpet suddenly vanished a few feet away from her, revealing the dusty wooden floorboards underneath. She thought she heard the House chuckle.

`Carl: began Roger and then he stopped and looked around him The walls were the colour of leaves at summer's end - just before they turned brown and fell to the ground. At least, that was the colour he'd always *imagined* them being. He remembered playing with Jennifer and Andrew along this hallway, chasing each other and falling onto brightly coloured beanbags. He looked at the stranger - the one Peri called the Doctor - and he knew he was crying, but he didn't care, and the Doctor seemed so sad, but it didn't matter, because he could see through his tears. He could *remember*.

Another triangle of carpet abruptly disappeared, one point of it

positioned against a side of the other one.

Òh look: the house said, delightedly. 'I'm making patterns'

`Doctor!' called Peri, anxiously.

`Don't want to leave, whined Carl, miserably.

Roger sat down next to him, with some difficulty crossing his legs. 'I know, he said, quietly. Ì won't leave you, Carl. I won't leave you alone: Carl looked up at Roger and then buried his face in the other man's chest. Thank you,' he whispered.

The Doctor looked at them for a moment and then quietly walked back to the TARDIS.

Peri was shaking her head:You can't just...'

The Doctor didn't quite meet her eye:They've made their choice,' was all he would say as he ushered her into the TARDIS and closed the door behind them.

Peri sat on the edge of the bed, not really looking at the too-familiar surroundings, seeing only the confrontation that had just taken place in the console room.

How could you just leave them like that?'

It wasn't my choice!'

`They weren't thinking straight. No person in their right mind would stay there!'

No? The pull of a home - especially one you've lived in for virtually your whole life - is very strong, Peri. Believe me, I... believe me.'

There had been something strange in the Doctor's eyes then -

something wounded and fearful, lurking behind the arrogance and bluster.

She shook her head wryly. She had long since given up trying to be the Doctor's shrink. She got up and wandered over to the dressing table with its baubles and keepsakes. *The pull of a home... '*

There was a knock at the door. An apologetic-without-trying-to-be-too-obvious knock. Peri smiled sadly. He wasn't all that bad really.

`You can come in, if you want,' she called.

The Doctor opened the door, surveyed the room, as if assessing it for a realtor's report, and then, rather unexpectedly, smiled warmly.

This was Susan's room; he said, appearing somewhat surprised by the realisation.

Peri sighed. She really didn't feel like being compared with one of the Doctor's other previous travelling companions:Susan?' she asked, dully.

The Doctor looked uncomfortable for a moment, but only a moment.

`My granddaughter,' he said, brightly. 'And this was her room' He picked up one of the enamel brooches and his face took on a distant, if slightly pained, look. 'Of course, then Polly took it, then Victoria, Sarah, Leela, Nyssa...' His voice trailed off uncertainly. He placed the brooch back on the dressing table and turned back towards her. This time the smile seemed a little forced:You're in distinguished company!'

Peri looked up at him. Somewhere, somehow, something had changed.

She thought she understood now Perhaps just a little.

"thanks for the room, Doctor,' she said and was surprised by just how much she meant it.

The Doctor gave a short, ironic bow. As you Americans are so fond of saying, you're welcome.'

Peri watched as he left the room in a swirl of colour.

`Yes, she murmured to herself, Ì think I am.'

SECTION 03

INCARCERATION

Deep Stretch

She was feeling the strain but she couldn't stop now If she kept up this pace she might beat her old record. The sweat poured from her and her muscles burned. With her eyes closed all she could hear was the whizz-whizz-whizz of the pedals and her own heavy breathing. She never felt more alive than when she was cycling.

The milometer beeped and Li Cheung slowed her pace. Eventually she halted, her legs like jelly. Reluctantly she opened her eyes to see the same steel-walled room. There was another exercise bike to her left but other than that and the recycling unit, there was nothing else in the room. Her existence was the very definition of minimalism. She checked her time.

Not bad. Close to her personal best.

A luminous blue fish swam past the tiny portal to her light and she watched it glow in the darkness outside. When her breathing had returned to normal she dismounted, wobbling slightly, and threw her towel in the recycler. Her stomach growled. Eating fish paste made her feel sick so she tried to wait until she was really hungry. That way there was more chance she would keep it down.

A sudden burst of noise pounded her eardrums and she staggered backwards, nearly knocking over a bike. The racket reverberated through the confines of the cell and everything vibrated violently. It was like standing inside a large church bell while it rang out the midnight hour.

The other women were shouting as Li struggled to the doorway and out Into the narrow corridor. The lights flickered and failed for a moment, long enough for her to collide with Melissa in the darkness. They both cried out just as the power came back on, Melissa falling backwards towards the dorm. Clutching her newly bruised shoulder, Li staggered into the living area as the clamour faded at last.

There was something new in here, something big that filled up a large portion of the cramped dining area. It was a box, wider than the table and so tall the lamp on top had dented the ceiling. She couldn't tell what colour it was under the murky lights; it might have been blue or green.

There were panels, windows, writing to one side she couldn't read because her head was spinning.

When the door opened and a tall white man emerged, Li wondered if one of the others had slipped something into her water. He was much older than her but quite dashing in a ridiculous sort of way, with a shock of white hair, green velvet jacket and frilly shirt.A short girl followed him, 131

dressed like something from the Sixties with her knee-high boots, wide-lapelled blue jacket and denim jeans.

`How do you do?' said the man. Ì'm the Doctor.'

The girl just waved.

Jo Grant tried not to make it obvious that she was cowering in the TARDIS

doorway.The women in the small metal room did not seem pleased to see them, the damp air smelled like rotten fish and there was mould growing on the walls. It was chilly, too, and she was glad she'd worn her jacket.The women looked tired, with dark circles etched beneath the ghostly distance in their eyes.There were about ten of them, all wearing the same open-mouthed expression, except the one nursing a bloody nose. They wore grey uniforms, but each had done something different with their clothing. One had torn a trouser leg free and turned it into a headscarf.

Another had ripped off her lapels and wore them as wristbands. An Indian-looking girl had painted an elaborate design on her outfit with some sort of paste. Jo glanced at a small window set into the far wall, wondering where on Earth they'd landed this time, but all she could see outside was darkness.

The Doctor was his usual assertive self. He'd already introduced them both, but he wasn't getting much response aside from astonishment.

Eventually a pretty but skinny Chinese girl stepped forward. She wore her outfit inside out. Ì'm Li Cheung. How did you get in here?' She spoke with an English accent, and an accusing manner.

Ì'm sorry if our arrival alarmed you,' the Doctor said. He moved to the table and sat down, inviting the injured girl to sit next to him. Hesitantly, she did so and he examined her bleeding nose while she tried to stem the flow with his hanky. Jo noticed that she'd torn the

midsection of her uniform to expose her navel. She must be used to the chill. `What's your name, my dear?' the Doctor asked her.

`Melissa,' she replied, her voice muffled.The other women eyed the new arrivals with a mixture of suspicion and fear Li Cheung was trying to see inside the TARDIS, so Jo stepped into the room and pulled the door shut behind her. Li seemed annoyed, but returned her attention to the Doctor.

'Have you come to release us?' she asked, staring at the Doctor like he was an alien with tentacles and three heads.

`Release you? Why are you here?'

Li laughed, but Jo couldn't detect much humour in it. The woman with the wristbands said, 'I'm in for aggravated assault'

Melissa spoke next. 'Mass fraud,' she said, brushing straggly hair away from her face to avoid getting blood in it.

A woman standing to Jo's left said, 'I'm in for murdering my doctor, but I didn't do it'

Jo took an involuntary step to the right. "this is a prison?' she asked.

Li glared at her. 'No, it's a holiday camp. Who are you people?'

`We're psychiatrists,' the Doctor lied. 'We're here to assess your psychological wellbeing. Do you mind if I ask you some questions?'

'Let me ask you something first: Li pointed to the TARDIS. 'What is that, how did it get in here and why does it have "police" written on it?'

The Doctor smiled his most charming smile. She didn't look impressed.

Ìt's a deep-sea diving pod, he explained. 'We borrowed it from the force.

As for how it got in, there's a sort of docking mechanism built into the prison cell, over there in the wall. It's very well hidden:

'Deep-sea?' Jo shuddered and her eyes returned to the darkness outside.

There was something out there: a bizarre-looking, almost spherical creature with huge teeth.A glowing blue globe hung on the end of a rod protruding from its head. She had never seen anything like it.

`You see that, Jo? If I'm not mistaken that's a female anglerfish, *Melanocetus johnsoni* to be precise, so we must be two thousand feet below the surface at the very least.'

'You know something about marine life?' Melissa asked him.

'A little, my dear, yes. We really are quite deep'

Li scoffed. 'They don't care how deep we are, they're just happy we're not overcrowding their precious prisons'

Suddenly feeling very cold, Jo resisted the urge to ask somebody to turn up the heating. She had the feeling that wouldn't go down too well.

Instead she shuffled closer to Melissa. The girl's nose had stopped bleeding now, and she smiled at Jo and offered her a seat.

She sat down, the cold steel of the chair only serving to make her feel chillier. There was no padding, not on the chairs, the floor, nowhere.

Everything was metal, with hard edges and the ubiquitous mould wherever she looked. The combined smell of the walls and the confined women was almost overpowering. 'Nobody should have to live like this,'

Jo commented.

Li crossed her arms and nodded in a rapid, sarcastic motion, making Jo feel about two inches tall. 'Uh huh, I think so too. I was going to write a very stern letter to my MP about it: She paused and frowned. 'How come you know so little about all this? Even if you haven't been briefed, my folks said we were all over the news back when they dropped us off the boat.You must have heard something:

'We're travelling psychiatrists,' the Doctor explained airily 'You were the first to be imprisoned like this?'

'One of the first few groups, yeah,' Li replied:An experiment, they said.

I suppose you're here to find out if it was a success so they can justify sinking more of us:

'Something like that. How long have you been down here?'

Li laughed. 'Unfortunately they didn't give us a ten-year calendar.'

`Two years, six months, seven days, three hours.'

Jo and the Doctor turned to look at a woman who sat crouched in one corner by a dispensing machine. Everyone else ignored her. Jo hadn't noticed her until now because she was easy to miss. She winced as the girl unfolded like a deck chair, her skeleton clearly visible beneath her loose skin. She was short, mousy, and so thin her clothes hung from her like washing on the line. Unlike the others she hadn't customised her outfit at all. She squeezed past two of her cellmates and disappeared into the corridor.

`Don't mind Miss Clark, Li said:She's our tiny bundle of joy.' She turned to the other women standing in a cramped circle around the table. Ì'll call you if the good doctor here decides to give us swimming lessons.'

Muttering under their breath, the women shuffled out. The alleged doctor-killer glared at the new arrivals as she went out. Jo felt much happier when it was just Melissa and Li left in the room with them.

`Where does the light come from, and the air?' she asked.

Melissa answered, 'The pod automatically filters water, processes fish and takes in chemicals to convert into power, but we have to generate more with the exercise bikes.'

Ì see: said the Doctor, stroking his chin thoughtfully. He was staring out the window again. 'You know, we shouldn't be able to see the fish -

they're invisible in their own bioluminescence.'

"There

are lure-lights on the outside of the pod to attract them, but they don't have much range.The fish have to be close for us to see them: The stuffy atmosphere in here was really making Jo feel ill. She hated the idea of not being able to open a window to let some air in.The gloomy lighting washed everything in a colour that was not helping to settle her stomach and she was aware of one of the fluorescent tubes

flickering almost imperceptibly, giving her a headache. 'Do they ever take you back to the surface?' she asked in a shaky voice.

Nope; said Melissa.The collar of her overall had slipped down and she hastily pulled it up again, but not before Jo noticed an ugly bruise on her shoulder. She obviously hadn't wanted the visitors to see, so Jo didn't mention it. Clearly life down here was harsher than she'd imagined.

The Doctor harrumphed. 'They must send you supplies at least?'

Li nodded. 'Twice a year a pod's sent down, much smaller than yours and without the symphony orchestra accompaniment. Brings us letters, fresh clothes, new books to read. We put our used stuff in it and send it back to the surface with our letters home. Everything else gets recycled.'

`Why don't you tell your Families what it's really like down here?' Jo asked, eager to help. 'I'm sure they'd do something about it'

Li slapped her forehead theatrically 'I wish I'd thought of that!' Jo tried 1 34

not to let the girl's attitude get to her. Despite the thick walls protecting them from the ocean, it was clear the inmates were under an enormous amount of pressure.

`Lay off her, Li,' Melissa said quietly. Li fell silent but didn't take her eyes from the newcomers.

Ì suspect the letters are edited before they're delivered, Jo, the Doctor explained. He stood up suddenly, taking her arm so she had to rise with him. 'Would you excuse us for a moment, ladies?' he declared and then guided Jo to the other side of the TARDIS.

`You want to let these women out, don't you?' he whispered.

Jo put on her most determined expression. 'Yes I do. It's barbaric, Doctor!'

Now listen to me, Jo. We can't set them free. They're criminals, remember? They've been sentenced for their crimes and now they're serving their time.'

`They might be innocent!'

`Yes, well, you may be right; but I hardly think it's up to us to decide'

'I know that, Doctor, but they have no space, no fresh air, no warmth, no privacy; no entertainment, no contact with their families. I can't believe anyone would treat prisoners like this - certainly not in England'

The Doctor chuckled. 'My dear Jo, governments have *always* been doing this sort of thing. Anything to save a few bob: He put his hands on her shoulders and looked her in the eye. Ì don't like it any more than you do but I can't allow convicted felons free passage in my TARDIS: Now wait a minute, Doctor.You of all people should know what it's like when the punishment doesn't fit the crime!'

The Doctor was clearly taken aback by her words, and his hands dropped to his sides. For a moment she regretted bringing such a sore point into the discussion, but it had needed to be said. His expression told her she'd made her point. He was quiet for a long moment and in the sickly green light he seemed older than usual and more than a little tired.

It hadn't been that long since the Doctor's release from exile, and she could tell the memory of his captivity still weighed heavily on him He sighed and wiped a frilly sleeve across his forehead. Very well, o, I'll see what I can do:

She grinned, forgetting her nausea for a moment. 'Thank you, Doctor.'

Tut I'm not letting them go free'

It was hard to have a conversation in this tank without everyone hearing

***k* but somehow the two new arrivals where managing. The big box was vibrating constantly, causing a background buzz in the prison's steel frame**

***that* masked the sound of voices. Li tried to turn her attention to the bizarre assortment of life outside the window but she was continually 135**

aware of the box filling up a good chunk of the room, even when it was outside her field of vision. After more than two years of growing

accustomed to the position of everything in the room, to suddenly have such a large object invade their space was deeply unsettling. Also, it felt odd having new people to talk to, especially when one of them was male.

He was too old to be her type, but it was funny how attractive any man could look after you'd not seen one for so long. Plus she'd forgotten how pleasant it was to be around people who didn't smell like they'd bathed in fish guts.

As she often did while sitting here staring out at the inky blackness, she thought of Anton and how much she would give just to hold his hand for five minutes. Prison above ground had been hell, it was true, with five or six people to one small cell and violence erupting regularly, exacerbated by severe shortages in staff. But at least they were allowed out into the yard on most days, and to have visitors once a week.At least she'd had real air to breathe, decent water to drink, and something other than fish paste to eat. At least she could try to avoid people she didn't like. Most of the women here were okay, except Clark who was a grade A nutcase and frequently violent. The others were tolerable, despite some irritating habits. Jill was writing a book on a datapad she was supposed to be using to compose letters to send home, and some days Li came very close to breaking both of the big woman's hands so she couldn't crack her knuckles before she started typing. Yuriko could snore for England, and Janet would sometimes refuse to shower for days on end. She sighed. Only seven and a half more years to go.

The odd couple were back at the table now, and Clark had returned.The crazy bitch was trying to squeeze into the tiny gap between the dispenser and the wall. Li listened as Melissa revealed Clark's master plan to the newcomers.

`She's trying to get thin enough to fit into one of the supply pods. We've told her she's wasting her time; they're barely big enough for a baby?

`Has anybody else tried to escape?' Jo asked.

Ònce,' Li replied, standing up. 'Jill tried to starve herself to death: She crossed the short distance to the table and sat down.

'Jill?'

The woman who didn't kill her doctor!

Òh.You stopped her then?'

`Hell yeah. We'd never have fit the body down the waste disposal chute: Jo grimaced, and for a moment Li thought the girl would throw up. It was about time she lost some of that healthy colour. 'As for the rest of us,' Li continued, 'we're all pretty much resigned to doing our time. If we try and escape they'll just put us back down here for longer, and that's the last thing we want. It's not like we can just swim away, anyway...' Her focus 136

swam over to the hatch in the ceiling. She'd thought about springing the lock, letting all those millions of tons of water come crashing down on them. It would be over in a second and they wouldn't have to go on living like this any more...

She didn't have the guts to do it.

`Might I ask you another question?' the Doctor said, shattering her train **of** thought. She fixated on him, enjoying the novelty of something new to look at. He seemed unsettled by this, but Li didn't care. It didn't bother her **if** it wasn't socially acceptable to stare at people where he came from. She didn't live an ordinary life, so why should she play by ordinary rules? 'Miss Cheung?'

She blinked. 'Sure. Shoot: She carried on staring at him, enjoying his discomfort.

Ìs there any way to contact the surface in an emergency?'

`There's a transmitter in the exercise room:

`Just as I thought. I think I can use that:

Ìt doesn't work though' The Doctor's face fell. `We found that out when Rachel started bleeding and we called for help. Either it's defective, or they never intended it to work. Either way they didn't get the message: Jo looked shocked. 'Is Rachel all right?'

Li shrugged. 'Oh yeah.That was ages ago'

Jo turned to her companion, her face defiant. 'Still need convincing, Doctor?'

He shook his head solemnly. 'No, I've heard enough:

'What are you going to do?' Li asked warily.

The Doctor stood up. Jo, fetch my tools please'

`Yes, Doctor.' She disappeared into the blue box.

`Miss Cheung, would you be so kind as to show me to the exercise room?'

Li didn't move. 'You're not the most forthcoming man on the planet, are **you? I** say again, what are you going to do?'

'My dear young lady, I'm going to get you out of here:

Òh no no no,' Li protested. 'You're not screwing things up for us. I'm not about to get my sentence doubled just to indulge you in your quest to **break the rules.**

`You'd rather stay here?'

`No, but unless your magic cabinet can take us to Mexico, there's no way you can set us free:

Ì assure you, Miss Cheung, I have no intention of setting you free. I am going to get you out of here:

Jo returned, making sure to close the cabinet's door behind her. Li was dying to know what was in there but she resisted the urge to push past the newcomers and barge her way in. Sometimes it was hard to keep in 137

check the kind of behaviour that would piss surface people off royally.

She turned back to the Doctor. 'OK, I'll show you the transmitter but I promise you it doesn't - '

With a cry of rage, Clark launched herself across the room. Li had forgotten she was there, and leapt back in surprise. Her chair clattered to the floor. Jo slammed into the cabinet in her rush to get out of the way.

The Doctor was on his feet in the same moment, ready for Clark's advance with surprising speed. He blocked the first fist that came hurling towards his face, and ducked the second.

`You'll ruin everything!' Clark screamed, but her punches couldn't make contact with his head.A moment later he lifted her up, holding her wrists tight. She cartwheeled her legs in an attempt to break free, but her slight frame had no weight to it and the Doctor's grip was

unshakeable. Li was impressed that he'd managed to stop the attack without hurting het Jill and Vijay were in the room now Together they dragged Clark, still struggling, away from the Doctor.Jo looked as startled as Li felt. Clark was shrieking now and in the confines of the tiny room the noise was splitting Li's head in two.

`Can you shut her up?' she yelled.

The Doctor brought out an antique pocket watch and began to swing it back and forth in front of Clark's face, like a magician at a children's party. He sang to her, very quietly but not unpleasantly. To Li's astonishment, Clark quietened down to the point where Jill and Vijay could let go.A minute later and she was curling herself back into the gap next to the dispenser. She wasn't asleep, and when the Doctor fell silent she picked up the tune he'd been humming. This Doctor was full of surprises.

Ì'll show you the transmitter,' she said.

Às I suspected' The Doctor sat cross-legged on the floor of the exercise room, sonic screwdriver in hand. Pieces of the transmitter were strewn about him. Jo stood by the far wall, keeping as much distance as the cramped room would allow. Between Clark's assault and Li's dismissive attitude, she was more than ready to leave this tin can.

Ì'm all ears,' said Li from the doorway. Melissa watched them, perched on a nearby bike. One of the other women was beside her, pretending to be exercising but really listening to the Doctor.

`The problem isn't at this end; this transmitter is working fine. I'm afraid the people on the surface just haven't been paying attention'

Li was silent for a moment and the woman on the bike stopped pedalling. Melissa's hand went to her mouth. Jo couldn't help but feel for them. Li dragged the palm of her hand across her chin and down her neck. `So what's the plan?'

The Doctor spoke through clenched teeth that held his screwdriver. If I can find the frequency to release the anchoring clamps, we should float to the surface.'

Ànchoring clamps?' Melissa said:I thought there were ballast tanks?'

The Doctor took the screwdriver from between his teeth and used it to

attach two components together. 'Oh yes, there are. Tanks will hold and release water to make the cell rise and sink, but the whole thing has to be anchored to the sea bed or we'd be dragged along with every eruption from the fissure. I believe the tanks will automatically expel water when the anchor is released by a remote signal.'

Melissa looked worried:There are bound to be alarms'

He smiled:I most certainly hope so'

Li stepped forward. 'Now wait a minute: Jo had to admit she was confused too.

Ìt's really quite simple,' the Doctor said in that slightly patronising tone of his.'lf you were all to escape and then you were caught, your sentences would be increased and you'd find yourself back at the bottom of the ocean. On the other hand, if the prison floats to the surface because of an apparent malfunction, the authorities will see the system is flawed and can't blame you. With a bit of luck, they'll abandon the project entirely'

The Doctor snapped the panel onto the transmitter with a flourish.

`There we go. Nobody will ever know it's been tampered with. I can activate it remotely with my screwdriver.'

`How do you know what frequency the anchor release uses?' Melissa asked.

Ì don't,' the Doctor replied:The transmitter will cycle through all the possible combinations. Unfortunately that means we're going to have to generate some more power:

Li turned to Melissa. 'Gather the troops,' she said. 'We've got some pedalling to do.'

This is a bad idea.' Vijay wasn't happy and Li could sympathise The younger woman had two kids waiting for her on the surface. As bad as being released in eight years might seem, getting out in twenty-eight was inconceivable. Li tried not to think about how much she missed Anton and her family.

She gazed around the room at the sceptical expressions of eight women she'd shared her life with for two and a half years, crammed into this tiny space. Only Clark was absent, sleeping in the dorm. Li could see the same conflict going on in each of those heads. Nobody

wanted to risk a longer sentence, but everyone was missing out on something. Jill should have that book published by now Amy should be with her cancer-stricken mother, who might well have died since her last letter. Vijay should see her 139

daughters again before they grew too old to be called children. Li had watched Yuriko's spirit crushed by this tank, and she was only here because she'd accidentally crippled the guy trying to mug her. She deserved to be free, but failing that at least she should see the sun again.

Any above-ground prison, even an overcrowded one, was better than this.

ÒK,' she said at last. 'Let's do *this.'*

`Very well,' said the Doctor. 'I hope you ladies are prepared for a workout.You need to pedal as fast as you can to generate enough power.'

Li nodded. `Melissa, ill, take the first shift.'

The two women climbed onto the bikes and started pedalling 'Good,'

said the Doctor, reading the display from a second device in his hand. `The power levels are rising.'

After ten minutes of high-speed biking, Melissa was starting to flag.

`Vijay, take over.' Gratefully, Melissa gave up her place on the bike for the other woman and collapsed against the wall gasping for breath. Ten minutes after that and the Doctor gallantly took over for Jill. He managed a good fifteen minutes before Li insisted she take his place.

She climbed on, taking a few deep breaths before slipping her feet onto the pedals. She started to push, gently at first, building the pace slowly. As her legs pumped faster, she closed her eyes and relaxed. She tried to block out the people around her and instead imagined how wonderful it would feel to be on a real bike again. She felt her hair whipping in the wind, the rush of air against her face leaving her breathless, the summer sun warming her skin and making the leaves on the trees shimmer as she sped by.

The illusion was shattered by a voice from the doorway. `This isn't going to work'

'It's not up to you, Clark,' Li said, fighting to maintain her rhythm as the pedals spun around.

I disagree' Her voice was as thin as her body `We're all in this together.

I get as much say as you do.'

`You lost your vote when you lost your mind; Li snapped.

`Maybe I should unseal the hatch. One good kick should break the lock.

It'd be so easy.'

Clark took a step backwards into the corridor. Vijay moved to stop her.

`Come on Clark,' she said, `get a grip.'

`Get out of my way,Vee:

Jo stepped forward. 'Miss Clark please, you must trust the Doctor. He knows what he's doing'

Clark responded by reaching out, grabbing Jo by the neck and pulling her in close.The captive girl yelped in surprise. Li slowed her pace making ready to jump off and intervene.

`Don't stop pedalling,' the Doctor warned. 'We're almost there!' He held out a hand to Clark. Ì really must insist that you let her go'

Ùntil you and this little bitch arrived I had it all worked out. The next pod arrives in ten days, and I was almost the right weight. I've been preparing for this every day since we got here. I'm not going to let you ruin it!'

The Doctor didn't answer. He was holding the pocket watch in his hand again. Li wanted to help but she had to keep pedalling. The others didn't dare move in case the psycho snapped her captive's neck.

`Don't do that, Doctor.' Clark twisted Jo's head slightly and the girl whimpered.The Doctor's watch went back into his pocket, to be replaced by that screwdriver device.

Li tightened her grip on the handlebars and noticed the other women grabbing onto something too. She pedalled all the more furiously.

Ì can give you the keys to my pod,' the Doctor offered. 'We can get you out of here:

Clark's attention was on the only man in the prison cell:Lock me inside your police box, Doctor? No thanks' She looked down at his hand. 'If that's a weapon you should really think about - '

The cell lurched. Jo and Clark were thrown to the floor. The Doctor stumbled against the wall. Li felt like her world was coming apart as the prison shook and tipped back and forth. There was a horrible sound of rending metal and rushing water, and then the sickening feeling of levitation.

`What have you done?' screamed Clark, struggling to her feet.

Ì must apologise, Miss Clark,' the Doctor yelled over her screeching.

With a cry he brought down his hand at the base of her skull. Clark dropped like a bag of bones. The Doctor grabbed Jo's hand as the floor lurched again. Li clung on to the handlebars for dear life.

Jo must have blacked out at some point because when she opened her eyes the Doctor was staring down at her, smiling benevolently. He helped her to her feet and together they moved to the living area where Jill and Vijay were trying to break the lock off the hatch. Finally they got it open.

Sunlight streamed in through the gap and the prisoners cried out at the sight. Fresh air flooded in and Jo breathed it deeply. It tasted good to her **and** she'd only been down here for a few hours. One by one, the inmates **climbed** out onto the roof and sobbed with joy at what greeted them.

`Shall we join them?' the Doctor suggested.

`Yes please, Doctor.' She seemed to have come through the resurfacing unscathed and even her slight headache dissipated when she climbed up the ladder onto the roof. She took in another lungful of sweet, fresh air.

The light hurt her eyes for a while; the other women were having a harder time adjusting.The tears running down their faces told Jo that the Doctor had made the right decision.

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She became aware of the sound of helicopters approaching. The authorities were on their way and the women had nowhere to go. Her eyes had finally adjusted and what she saw took her breath away.

Floating in the water for miles in every direction were countless thousands of prison cells just like this one. Atop most of them stood groups of men, on others groups of women. All of the prisoners were waving to each other and cheering.

`My God,' Li said. 'So many...'

Ì had no idea,' agreed Melissa.

Even Clark, last to join them, was rendered speechless by the sight.

The helicopters were overhead now and the Doctor was pulling Jo back towards the hatchway. She didn't resist, still astonished at the vast number of prisons now bobbing on the surface. Glancing at his face she noticed that he didn't seem as surprised as everyone else. Jo's mouth dropped open.

`Did you know...?'

The Doctor grinned:Lucky we generated all that extra power, wouldn't you say? The release signal travelled quite a distance. Come on, Jo, I think we should slip away quietly, don't you?'

Li felt panic rising when she heard the trumpeting noise inside the cell.

She calmed down when she realised that the mysterious 'psychiatrists'

were no longer on the roof. She didn't have to look inside to see that the tall box was gone too.

She would never have to look inside again.

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Inmate 280

Cavan Scott

'It was the first time I'd killed a man you know. But it sure as hell wasn't the last'

Brad Travers's gaze fell upon the seals that batted into the evening air on the side of the harbour. He hadn't been back down here for nearly forty years.Too many bad memories. But now the ghosts had to be laid to rest.

`What happened?' asked the young man standing beside him in the most ridiculously old-fashioned outfit Travers had ever seen. But hey, how should, he know what was in fashion these days? He was in his eighties, after all, and had spent most of his life in uniform. Too much of his life, at that.

He'd been standing here alone looking out into the bay, when the guy had sidled up, stuffing a pungent helping of clam chowder into his mouth.

They'd stood there for a few seconds of silence before he'd piped up, asking if that was Alcatraz out there on that island.

With a bitter laugh, Travers nodded.

That sure is Alcatraz boy, the hell-hole where they threw the worst of the worst. And I'm not just talking about the inmates either. No, I could sure tell you some tales about the Rock if you had the time.

The younger man beamed the most genuine smile Travers had ever seen, his eyes sparkling in the setting sun. For a second, the old man felt a flash of recognition, his stomach clenching, before he shook off the feeling. That was ridiculous. If he'd met a character like this before, he'd sure as hell remember it.

`Don't worry about me,' the young guy was saying. `Trust me, I've got all the time in the world:

Travers didn't know why he suddenly felt the urge to tell the story there and then, after all he'd kept the secret for decades. There was something in the stranger's face, something that told Travers that he wouldn't laugh him all the way to the asylum. Or perhaps it was the growing realisation that he'd no one else to tell his story to, no grandkids to bounce on his knee and thrill with his adventures. No one at all.

Ì used to be a Correctional Officer over there back in the... well, back before you were born:

The kid's eyes swept from Travers face to the Rock as he continued to polish off his chowder. Travers settled onto the railing.

'I remember one night in October, just before Hallowe'en. It was just a

regular night, the same old faces, the same old routine. I was up on the gun gallery keeping watch at night, but my mind wasn't on the job. I was daydreaming about some girl I'd seen in a movie the night before: Elsa Lancaster or Valerie Hobson, I can't remember which...'

Travers paused to clear his throat.The stranger glanced up at the sound of his hack, but Travers waved the concern away and continued with his tale.

Ì can still hear the voice today: "Get the keys up. Now!"'

Travers's head snapped around to see his superior officer Ned Leech tearing along Broadway, the inmates' nickname for the dank corridor that ran through the pen. Behind him, a pack of five men were charging after Leech, led by Wai-Chun, the hulking Chinese that had ended up here for rubbing out an entire family when they had insulted his Dad's chow mein.

The block echoed with Wai-Chun's maddened war cry as he managed to grab Leech by the shoulder and spin him round. Leech threw back his elbow and slugged Chun in the stomach, causing the giant to double up with a grunt, the dragon tattoo on his bald head lurid against his yellow skin Leech span on his heel and tossed his set of keys into the air.The ring arched in the air, reflections from the flood-lighting glinting off the keys, and landed at Travers's feet with a cold, metallic clang - safe from the prisoner's grasp.

They may have been safe, but Leech certainly wasn't. One of Chun's gang, a certain greasy Bronx-boy by the name of Reinkemeyer, wasn't too pleased that the bulky officer had felled his boss, and snatched Leech, pulling his hair so his head jerked back with a jolt. It was then that Travers saw what was tucked into his waistband.The maniac had stolen a carving knife from the kitchen, the blade of which was now pressing into Leech's jowly neck.

Travers's eyes met Leech's and in seconds he knew what he had to do.

Instinct took over as he swung up his rifle and took aim. Whatever happened, Leech would be dead in seconds if he missed. Sweat beading on his forehead, Travers's finger tightened around the trigger.

Reinkemeyer's brains exploded from the back of his head and splattered across Wai-Chun's expansive chest. The other men in the

pack turned and fled, only to be met by the nightsticks of the guards moving in behind then

Grinning wildly, Leech twisted and savagely socked the c rim across the face. He may have piled on the pounds of late, but old Leech could still pack a wallop. The prisoner went down hard, teeth, blood and spittle splashing over the grimy tiles. To make sure he stayed down, Leech delivered a sharp kick to the sap's groin.

Shaking ever so slightly,Travers lowered his rifle and gazed down at the 144

criminal he had just executed, his heart thumping beneath his rib cage.

That night, emotions ran high on the Rock. Wai-Chun's bid for freedom resulted in two days in the Hole, isolated and in complete darkness. The thought of being banged up in pitch black sent a shiver down Travers's spine. He'd always hated the dark as a kid. Couldn't sleep without a light on in the corridor outside his room. He once had to release an old timer back into the light from a weeklong spell in the Hole and had asked the guy how he'd stopped himself from going mad. The man had simply snorted an embittered laugh before explaining that in the first hour he'd removed a button from his shirt and tossed it into the darkness. He'd then spent the next sixty minutes trying to find it, scrabbling around on his hands and knees. When he discovered his prize, he had held it tightly in his palm for a second, offered a prayer of thanks to the almighty, and then threw it in the air again. The constant game of hide and seek kept his marbles intact.

There was one thing Travers was sure about. There was no way **in heaven or earth that he was going to end up on the wrong side of the caboose.**

His footsteps echoed as, slowly, he made his inspection of Block C.The excitement of the day had left the prisoners agitated and nervous. Any escape attempt would mean the guards would be extra vigilant and that Leech would be more sadistic than ever, if that were possible. Even Travers shared the convicts' dislike of his superior. He remembered his first day on Alcatraz. Leech had reminded him of the rules and regulations of **the Rock.**

`*Regulation for inmates, USP Alcatraz,'* Leech had snarled, flipping to the front of the book. — The prisoners are entitled to food, clothing, **shelter and medical attention. Anything else they get is a**

privilege:"

Leech had leered up from the rulebook to fix his beady eyes on the young rookie. 'Just remember, Travers. On my watch they have no privileges.They don't deserve them'

Travers had tried to argue but had been cut short by two hate-filled words.

`They're animals:

Well, they didn't look like animals tonight. No, instead Travers could **see nothing but scared faces staring out at him from the cells. From the next block he could hear Sanders, bashing his cup against the bars, yelling out that he didn't want to be shot. He'd done nothing wrong. The poor wretch. How long would it be before they shifted him to an asylum? The attempted escape had certainly seemed to snap the remaining fragments of** his sanity.

Travers rubbed the bridge of **his nose, trying to block the smell of the 145**

stale sweat of hundreds of men cooped up like chickens.At least the shift was almost over. Soon he'd be slamming back a stiff slug of whiskey at the gin palace. There may even be a dame there to chat up, some dish who looked like Valerie Hobson.Yeah, he could be pitching woo before he hit the sack.

Straightening, Travers flexed his neck and turned to return to the observation platform when a single, quiet voice stopped him in his tracks.

`What did it feel like, Officer Travers?'

Travers's eyes narrowed to focus on the source of the question. It had to be *him,* just to improve his mood. Inmate two-eighty, or Richard A Fells to use the name on his records. He was a short runt of a nance, pigeon-chested and weedy to look at. But there was something about Fells that unnerved Travers, something he couldn't quite put his finger on.The boob just didn't seem to belong.Travers almost smiled to himself. Of course he didn't belong; this was a penitentiary. No one was supposed to belong here.

`What you say there, Fells?'

Ì asked you what it felt like,' the rubber-faced inmate replied, piercing

blue-grey eyes staring out from beneath impossibly bushy eyebrows.

`What did it feel like to kill a man?'

For a second Travers didn't know what to say, his brow creasing at the query. Thankfully he was saved from having to answer.

Òh, don't worry Mr Fells, it was a rhetorical question. After all, it's obvious that this is your first time. You probably need some rest. Blotting out a life takes a lot out of you.'

And with that, inmate two-eighty merely returned to the book he was reading - War *of the Worlds,* or some such nonsense.

`Boy, that guy gave me the creeps, you know?'Travers spluttered through a mouth full of chocolate. He offered the bar of Hershey's to the kid, but the stranger shook his head politely. 'He had this weird accent, like Irish or Scotch or something. And you always felt he was watching you, sizing you up somehow. He was weird'

A seagull cried out from above, causing Travers to look up. 'Damn vermin.They should do something about those scavengers'

The wind from the sea ruffled the young man's shoulder-length hair.

`So, what happened to... Wai-Chun, wasn't it?'

`Yeah, Wai-Chun' Travers confirmed, shoving the last of the chocolate into his mouth. 'Old Leech used to call him the "yellow peril", you know.'

`How un-politically-correct; the kid commented, but Travers ignored the jibe, lost in his memories once more.

`He was eventually let out of the Hole and moved to the secure wing; where they used to hold the Bird Man, you know? Those following nights 146

were hell. It was almost as if someone had turned up the heat in place.

Fights were breaking out every single day.Attacks of the officers increased too. One of my buddies lost an eye. An inmate stole a razor from the barbers, see. Slashed Charlie up bad, poor guy. His wife made him resign after that. Saw him once again, years later when I was on the Force but he was a mess. Face like roadkill:

Travers sucked in a lung-full of sea air, ignoring the slight rattle in his

chest as he did.

Ìt was chaos in there. Only one person seemed to be enjoying himself; Leech. Every time an inmate put a foot out of place it gave Leech another reason to crack some heads. He was one sick son of a bitch. And behind **it** all, whatever happened, *be* was there standing in the background.

Watching, as if he was waiting for something big to happen'

`Who? Officer Leech?'

`No, no, not him: Travers wheezed:I mean the little guy: Fells. Well, he got his wish. Something big happened a week or two later: Travers hated the smell of pasta. The entire canteen reeked of the stuff.

Like old socks. But he shouldn't complain. The atmosphere was at least better today. It had been a week since Charlie quit, and there hadn't been that much trouble. Not yet, anyhow.

But things still weren't right. As he strode around the canteen, Travers threw a glance across the men chowing down on the spaghetti. Lunch times were usually noisy with the men laughing, joking and goading each other.Today was different. No laughter, no name-calling. Just a low hum of murmuring, like a swarm of angry bees. Hell, perhaps the atmosphere wasn't so great after all. Leech could obviously sense it too.The bulky man **had** a mush like thunder and was repeatedly tapping his nightstick into the palm of his thick paw. Yeah, nice one, Leech. Like that'll improve the mood.

The buzz of whispers and muttering was increasing second by second **and** Travers could hear one voice beneath the others, someone distinct **and** urgent. Of course: Fells!

Travers spun around to spy Fells slipping down the table to sit himself by Wai-Chun. Why they'd released the Chinese from isolation he'd never know.The goon was trouble, and it disturbed him somehow to have those **two** getting all cosy. He strained to hear what the little fellow was saying, slowly walking towards the table. What was it, something about the food?

They'd been moans aplenty recently, with more than one con saying he'd **riot** if spaghetti was served one more time.Travers couldn't blame them.

It was muck.

He was nearer now and could just make out the conversation.

`Spaghetti. Always spaghetti'

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Wai-Chun didn't even acknowledge Fells's presence, let alone reply.

`How do they think they can get away with this? Treating us like pigs.

Don't they know who we are?'

Chun snorted in agreement, swirling more of the brown sludge around his fork.

'I don't know how you put up with this... and the rest of it all A man like you. Proud. Loyal to his family?

Now, Fells had Wai-Chun's attention.

All the laughter behind your back.The sniggering. Being called a - what was it? "Stupid nip"?'

`What?' Chun's anger was obvious. Travers picked up his pace. He had to get Fells away before something kicked off. Even from a distance he could see the red mist falling behind Wai-Chun's eyes.

Ì know. If they are going to say *that* about your mother, the least they could do is get your nationality right'

Travers couldn't move fast enough. With a roar,Wai-Chun had shot to his feet and grabbed the bench, spinning it onto its top. Cutlery, plates and convicts clattered to the floor. In seconds there was uproar. One inmate, who had just received a lap-full of hot bolognaise, had taken a swing at the Chinese - who had snapped his arm in rage. Fights erupted all around, with the first blood being spilled in seconds. Travers watched helplessly as another of his fellow officers hit the deck, his hands clutching at his guts that had that moment been spilled at the hands of a convict armed with cleaver from the kitchen.

And in the middle of it all sat Fells, quietly sipping a mug of water and looking around himself. Travers couldn't believe it when he heard the guy ask in a quiet, still voice, 'Was it something I said?'

Beside him Leech was loosening the teeth in the jaw of an inmate who'd had the audacity to try and take him out, but Travers knew that this was out of control. In minutes the riot would spread and all hell

would break loose. There was only one way out, but he prayed that Leech wouldn't take it.

His prayer wasn't answered. Elbowing a Greaser in the neck, Leech yelled over the cacophony to any guard that could hear him.

`Release the gas. Do it now'

Time slowed down. To Travers's horror, he saw one of the officers tear over to the canteen doors and slam them shut.This was it then; this is how it would end Above their heads, cylinders of lethal gas were attached to the roof. In the event of a riot that couldn't be controlled, the gas would be released and everyone in the canteen would suffocate. Until today, they had never been used.Travers closed his eyes and waited for the inevitable.

Suddenly it was if the noise of the riot disappeared and all Travers could hear was the clunk of the lever being pulled, the cylinder-release 148

mechanism snapping open, and the hiss of the acrid yellow smoke descending like a cloud of death from above. Strange that he could find comfort in darkness at the end. Crouching on the floor, Travers put his head between his hands and listened in horror as one by one the screams of the men were stifled and the room fell as silent as the grave.

It was only then that Travers realised two important facts. One, he couldn't smell the gas, and two, he was still alive.

Cautiously he opened his eyes and for a second forget to breathe as he took in his surroundings. The thick, yellow gas swirled around the canteen, shrouding the shadow forms of over a hundred stiffs. But how could he be witnessing this? Why did the gas just stop in mid-air just inches from his face, as if pressed against a sheet of glass?

Ì knew it, came a triumphant voice from behind him. 'I knew it had to be you. Who else has been causing so much trouble these last few weeks and stirring the penitentiary into a frenzy.'

Rising,Travers turned to see Fells standing quite calmly while the smog thrashed behind him. His face was more alive than he had ever seen, smug and full of excitement, while his arm stretched out in front of him - his finger pointing at Wai-Chun, who looked as stunned as Travers felt. With a thud, Chun dropped a limp body to the ground where it rolled over to lie face up. Damn It was Leech, his mug a

bloody pulp. Chun had taken his revenge.

`There was no need for them to release the gas, though. So many needless deaths. Such a waste:

Travers shook his head as if to clear a haze. There had to be an explanation for this, but when it came he could hardly believe his ears.

Ìt was very clever though, to enclose us in a telekinetic bubble.And I'd thank you for saving my life, if I didn't know better. You'd have preferred **it** if I had expired out there, in the smog:

I

'Look man; Wai-Chun exploded. 'I haven't a due what you're talking about or what the hell is going on here, but it's freaking me out: Fells's face crumpled in disgust.

Òh, you can drop the act now.There's no one left to hoodwink, is there?

I knew you'd show your true colours eventually. It wasn't easy, tracking you down here, smuggling myself into Alcatraz.And all because you were released from your own prison in a recent seismic shift. You must have thought it was your birthday, Easter and Christmas all come at once when **you** sensed how much anger was locked up on this island, waiting for you **to** feast upon.'

That was enough. Whatever was happening, Travers was the last remaining correctional officer on Alcatraz and he had to take control.

`Fells, what the hell are you yawing about?' he yelled, brandishing his nightstick threateningly. Fells merely chuckled to himself 149

`Well, Officer Travers, our friend Wai-Chun isn't all he seems. He's just a host, for a grotesque mass of hatred and bile that is living inside him: Now Travers knew that Fells was mad. Saying that, was his own sanity in question after this?

Ìt's called a Threckon, a vile creature that feeds on negative emotion: Travers didn't try to prevent the incredulous look from swarming over his face.

`For three millennia, it has been trapped under the fault line of what you now know as San Francisco. Now it's free it wants to grow, so it

can cause bedlam and feast on the results:

`Supposing I believe you for a second,' Travers pointed at the small man with the nightstick, 'how do you know so much about this thing?'

`Who do you think imprisoned it there in the first place, officer? I first encountered the Threckon a couple of bodies ago,' came the reply, sorrow seeping into the inmate's voice. Ì should have known that locking things up wasn't the answer.They just fester, like an untreated wound.And so it must end, today:

`Look, this is insane,' hissed Wai-Chun. 'This gink must be mad. Have you heard what he's saying? He's been reading one to many Shadow novels if you ask me'

But Travers wasn't asking Wai-Chun In fact he wasn't even listening to him. Instead he was staring over his shoulder, where Senior Officer Leech was rising unsteadily to his feet. How had the old man recovered so quickly from that beating? The answer would come soon enough.Without warning, Leech began to gag, as if all the violence and death had finally become too much for him. But something else was wrong. With every retch Leech's throat expanded, as if something big was being forced up and without warning a mass of blubbery, slimy flesh erupted from his mouth, his lips splitting as it shot out towards Fells.

Shrieking in terror, Wai-Chun threw himself out of the way of the hideous mound of writhing tentacles and, before Fells could stop him, stumbled through the invisible barrier that kept them safe from the gas.

Helpless, Travers could do nothing but watch in shock as the hulking Chinese sucked the deadly vapours into his lungs. With a rattling scream he collapsed like a puppet whose strings had been cut, all the time clawing at his throat. Within seconds, he lay still.

Ah, such an angry death. How delicious:

It was Leech's voice, strained and restricted by the slimy tentacle that ran from deep within his throat to the pulsating sack of sludge that was inching towards the floor. Whatever this Threckon was, it had obviously nourished itself on Wai-Chun's death and had doubled its size since slopping from Leech's shredded kisser.

`But it seems, the gargling voice continued, 'the biggest banquet has

been saved for last. How angry you have become,Time Lord. So weary of life, and death. I shall savour this treat'

A tentacle shot out from the creature and whipped towards Fells, tangling around his ankle and splattering his trousers with foul, scarlet slime Fells immediately lost his footing and crashed to the floor, tentacles lassoing his struggling body, their ridged ends slicing into his skin.

Ì must send you back to your own dimension: He yelled despite his efforts, a statement that only prompted a hideous, mucus-filled cackle from the thing that used to be Leech.

Ànd you're so angry Doctor, so angry that I've beaten you, my judge, jury and gaoler. And as your fury grows, so does my strength'

Leech's body was shaking furiously as bony spikes burst through his skin all over his body, themselves exploding into a *mass* of flailing tentacles.Travers realised that if he was going to do something, he'd have to move quickly.The creature was obviously thriving and as for Fells, well, the poor plug was gagging on the tentacle that had thrust itself into his open yap. As he continued to fight a losing battle, the tiny man fixed Travers in the eyes, as if urging him to fulfil his destiny. Slowly, trailed by a stream of gore, Fells's body was dragged towards the creature, which reared up to reveal a hideous scar of a mouth lined with row upon row of ragged, metallic teeth.

With a yell of exertion Travers launched himself forward and charged at Leech's mutating body. His former superior turned in surprise, but it was too late. Travers's hands impacted on his chest, and Leech was shoved back through the skin of the bubble. Immediately the poison in the air beyond took effect and Leech buckled, gasping for oxygen. As the host died, the Threckon creature screeched in agony, its scabbed hide blistering before, tentacles and all, it exploded into shadows, a fine dust all that remained of its grisly form.

Yet there was no time to celebrate. With the creature dead the bubble had no energy to support it, and the force field collapsed around them.

The acrid fumes swam into Travers's lungs, burning his throat and stinging his eyes. He didn't even feel the floor as he hit it, but as his convulsing body gave into the velvet blackness, he was sure he felt Fells's fingers press against his temples and heard the soft, lilting voice assuring him that everything would be fine.

Ì survived of course, or else I wouldn't be talking to you today, would I?'

The young man smiled warmly.

Òf course not'

Travers wiped a crumb of chocolate from his chest and coughed violently. It was almost as if he could feel the cancer moving in his lungs.

Guess that gas did its job after all, just fifty years late. Nodding, he 151

acknowledged the stranger who had attempted to steady him as he stumbled.

`What about the other fellow?' He asked Travers, when the old man had got his breath back.

'Eh?'

`Fells. Do you know what happened to him?'

Ì never saw him again. For all I know he died out there.After that night I never stepped foot on Alcatraz again. The powers that be were embarrassed by the entire affair and when I asked for a job as a cop they jumped at the chance to keep me quiet. Got myself a promotion and a top pension, as long as I didn't blab to anyone about Leech or Fells.That suited me fine. I wanted to forget:

Ànd did you? Forget, that is.'

`Yeah, I forgot all right. I'd always wanted to be a cop, always thought it'd be... exciting. Dangerous'

A chill passed through the old man as the faces of all the men he'd brought down over the years flashed before his eyes. The widows he'd created in the name of justice. One-ShotTravers they'd called him in at the precinct, always ready to bag his man, shooting first, asking questions later. And all the time, he'd never felt a thing, his heart cold after that night on the Rock. Leech would have been proud. The young Brad Travers would have despaired.

Ì thought it would be fun:

`Well, you're obviously a strong man, Mr Travers:

Travers shot a quizzical look at the young man who had fixed him with a piercing gaze.

`Most men would have crumbled in your position,' the stranger turned back to the island, his long, velvet frock coat rustling in the wind. 'Or at least found their moral compass dulled by facing evil, time and time again.

Trust me,' he smiled. 'It happens to the best of us. You're blessed'

For a second the guy looked as bleak as Travers felt, lost in memories of past lives, staring out towards the bay. It was all Travers could do to staunch the sob that threatened to erupt from his rotten guts.

`Yeah, kid, he said bitterly .'I'm blessed, all right?

Doing Time

Lance Parkin

Shepard had a quantum moment of utter panic.

'Concentrate,'Adams's voice warned from above.

`Sorry, boss. I feel a bit trapped. I never liked confined spaces:

`Now he tells me:

They were in one of the power stacks,Adams a few feet above Shepard, the pair of them like a couple of chimney sweeps. The only light was the blue glow of the power lines, running up the side of the stack in parallel.

It was cramped, but Shepard's unease was deeper than that. Something he couldn't put his finger on - maybe even something there weren't words for.Then the cylinder came away, and Adams gently lifted it down. Careful not to brush against any of the lines, Shepard took it off him. It was about a metre long, perhaps half as broad. He held it steady as his partner detached the last couple of cables from its top. It was surprisingly light.

Shepard opened up the carpet bag, but hesitated.

Are you sure this is it?'

Ì'm sure. Careful, it's delicate,' Adams reminded him 'Not to mention Valuable:

`You'd think it would be heavier, that's all I'm saying. It feels like it's made of polystyrene.'

Ìt's heavier on the inside'

'Eh?'

Shepard slipped the cylinder into the bag, carefully fastened it up, then inched his way out of the machinery and into the corridor. The gleaming white was such a contrast that he spent a moment or two blinking.

Adams had joined him, and took the bag off him. 'You don't have to understand, he assured him.

`We need to get out of here before they *miss* that thing'

"That's the only thing you need to understand,'Adams agreed.

They hurried down the corridor, up a flight of stairs.

Are you sure it's this way?'Adams asked.

Ì know where I'm going'

Sure enough, they were soon in the control room.

'It looks just the same,' Shepard said.

`How did you think it would look?'

`Well, now we've got - ' Shepard patted the bag -

I thought it

Would power down'

Ìt's got reserve power, just not enough to take off:

Adams moved around the control panels. `Which one, which one?'

Ì think it's that red lever?

`You sure?'

`Yeah'

The double doors swung open, and the two of them ran out. It was cold outside, the small moon's atmosphere was thin. They could see smoke from the settlement.

Adams closed the doors behind him, and when he'd done that, Shepard couldn't see where they'd been.

`How do they ever find the way in?'

`Save your breath for the run back'

Their shuttlecraft was about half a mile away, in the opposite direction to the settlement. They radioed ahead, made sure Morgan was firing up the engines. He could confirm that the owner of the device they'd just liberated was still at the settlement, investigating rumours of 'time experiments'. Rumours that Adams had carefully seeded the Imperial Datanet with just the other day.

The thin atmosphere cancelled out any benefit of the low gravity, and it took them about six minutes to get back to the shuttle. For a moment, Shepard wondered if it really could be this easy. But as he passed the bag inside for Morgan to take, then clambered in after Adams, he realised it was.

Morgan and Shepard hurried to the cockpit. The pre-flight checks had been done.All Shepard had to do was flick a row of switches and press one button. Then the shuttlecraft was away, powering up, straight out of that thin atmosphere, straight out of that low gravity.

`We've got away with it, Adams said under his breath, as their shuttle passed into the asteroid belt, and they saw the warp ship waiting for them. 'We actually did it...'

The warp ship was soon on one of the regular trading lanes, indistinguishable from a dozen other warp ships. It was four hours to Gateway Nine Zero Zero One, and they used the time to disassemble the shuttle, putting the pieces through the waste disintegrator and scattering what was left out through the vents into hyperspace.

Adams spent the time in his quarters with the cylinder, which stayed in the bag. There was a stasis-field generator in the bag, one that had activated the moment it had been fastened. Adams watched a bank of

Schodinger Compensators. If anyone tried to look in the bag, whatever method they used, they'd set off an alarm. None of the needles so much as flickered.

They took the long way round, changed warp ships at Nine Eight Six Six. This ship was more luxurious than the first, and Shepard, Adams and 154

Morgan took it in turns to sample the pleasures. Shepard wasn't interested In the women on offer here - he had his Celeste, and he'd be seeing her soon enough. It had been three weeks, and the separation was almost physically painful now He couldn't wait until tomorrow, when he'd see her again.

Their warp ship docked at Nine Zero Zero One ten minutes ahead of schedule.The three of them had memorised the route to the rendezvous point with their contact. They pushed their way past the various travellers, shoppers, refugees and merchants who populated every Gateway station. Humans, aliens, robots... all sorts of people were here.

Shepard lost track of Adams and Morgan in the crowd for a moment.

Damn it. He decided to press on. He knew where they were headed, after all.

`Shepard?' an unfamiliar voice called out.

Despite himself, Shepard turned, already regretting it. What an idiot - as good as confirming his identity before he'd even seen the guy.

It was a human, or at least he looked like one. He wore an old-fashioned tweed jacket, a long scarf and a wide grin. Shepard couldn't be sure how old he was. He found himself looking into the man's eyes. There was a young woman with him, not a bad-looking one, in a neat designer dress straight from the pages of a magazine.

Ì know what you did, Shepard!

'I' m not Shepard.'

Òh come on. Look at me. Do you think I was born yesterday?'

Why ever would he think that, Doctor?' his companion asked.

Doctor? Oh no.

Ìt's a figure of speech.'

Ìt's not me; Shepard gabbled. 'You've got the wrong man.

The Doctor grabbed Shepard's sleeve. 'If you know who I am; he said quietly, 'then you know that I'm not here... officially. But you've taken something and when they catch up with you. Well... they won't be as lenient as me.'

`You trying to cut me a deal?' Shepard asked suspiciously.

`Pardon?'

`You going to put in an offer? I don't know what you've heard, but...

well, it's valuable.'

`Valuable? You stole it for the money?'

Shepard clamped his lips shut. 'I'm not saying anything!

`You can trust me, I'm a Doctor. No? Give me a name!

`Grass up my client? No way.'

The woman rolled her eyes. 'You've as good as confessed to stealing it.

Your posture and vocal inflections alone - '

Ì'll deal with this,' the Doctor snapped at the girl:Look, Shepard, it's not me you have to worry about. Look... how about this: you give me back what you stole, that will be that.The end.'

`Lousy con job, Doctor. If you really are the Doctor. I risk life and limb to steal it, then you trick me into just giving it you. Nice try'

The Doctor sighed **and** let go of his sleeve. `Shepard...'

Shepard found himself looking back.

Ìf you don't change your ways, you're bound to end up doing time,' the Doctor warned solemnly.

The other two were waiting for him at the rendezvous point, a little impatiently

`Got a little lost, Shepard confessed.

Adams and Morgan smiled at each other.

'Luckily we're a little early,' Adams told him

Òur clients are due... now.'

The air shimmered and parted and the creature stepped out. It was squat, in metal armour. It watched them suspiciously through narrow slits in its helmet.

`You have it?'

Adams held up the bag. The creature took it from him and started to open it.

'Careful,' Morgan warned. `You can look, but don't break the stasis field.'

The creature looked up, then nodded. He inspected the contents of the bag.

The impeller for a time rotor: Shepard said. 'Stolen from the heart of a TARDIS:

`Yes:The creature sounded almost impressed.

Ànd we sneaked it out from under the Time Lords' noses. If they'd seen us... we wouldn't be here.'

Indeed not. Here'

The creature unclipped a device from its belt and held it in its claw for them to look at, then passed it to Shepard.

`We wanted gold.The deal was gold'

A lot of it.'

"This is a molecular resequencer,' the creature hissed impatiently. It reached over and grabbed at Shepard's hat.

`Hey!' Shepard clutched it to his head. It was a family heirloom, and he had no intention of losing it. Even if it was, technically, only an heirloom for the family he'd stole it from.

The creature touched the device to the hat. Shepard heard a crackling noise, and his head suddenly became very heavy. He sagged, found it hard to stand.

The other two helped remove the hat. It was solid gold.

Ìt will convert any solid material into an equivalent volume of gold: the creature explained. 'It has a limited power supply - enough to convert the hundred tonnes of gold we agreed as your fee'

`Hell, and we just hired a transport ship to shift it all'

The creature rasped a laugh. 'Use the ship to get home. Then use the device on it:

It looked down into the bag again, then stood straight and slapped its chest with one claw - a salute, Shepard realised. `Thank you.You shall rank as heroes to our race. We shall sing songs honouring your names'

Ìf it's all right with you, leave our names out of it,' Shepard suggested.

The creature nodded, picking up the bag. As you wish'

The air parted again, and the creature stepped through.A moment later, space had swished back to normal.

The three men looked at each other, then down at the matter converter.

The next day, it was done. Just under a hundred tonnes of gold were deposited with the Galactic Bank - Shepard had decided to keep the hat

- and an hour later the three of them went their separate ways. They'd agreed not to meet up again.They'd known each other a couple of years, they trusted each other, but they weren't exactly drinking buddies. The three of them had different lives to lead. Different ways to spend their money.

Shepard went straight back to Celeste. She was pleased to see him, so relieved that he'd come back from the job unscathed. And

she was delighted by the hat when he gave it her.

The quiet life, he'd decided. Celeste deserved nothing less.

As Celeste carefully undressed him, Shepard felt like his past was being shed. From now on, there would just be Celeste. Kissing her, feeling her skin against his, smelling her hair. There was a moment where he forgot everything.

Later, she lay asleep beside him, so peaceful. He looked over at the bedside clock as it flopped over to midnight and Shepard had a simple thought:

Today was the first day of the rest of his life.

Shepard had a quantum moment of utter panic.

`Concentrate:Adams's voice warned from above.

`Sorry, boss. I feel a bit trapped. I never liked confined spaces'

Ì know. So you keep saying:

They both hesitated. *Deja* vu,'Adams said.

`We've practised this so many times...' Shepard noted, `so it's only natural it feels like we've done this before'

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He looked around. What were they doing here? He didn't even know what sort of energy was flowing through the power lines. It was blue, some of the time it looked like a liquid, but if you stared hard, it began to look like a stream of dots.What did that?Then the cylinder came away, and Adams gently lifted it down. Careful not to brush against any of the lines, Shepard took it off him It was about a metre long, perhaps half as broad.

He held it steady as his partner detached the last couple of cables from its top. It was light, but he'd expected that. Shepard opened up the carpet bag, then slipped the cylinder inside. He carefully fastened it up, then inched his way out of the machinery and into the corridor. The gleaming white was such a contrast that he spent a moment or two blinking.

`We need to get out of here before they miss that thing: he told Adams.

"that's the only thing you need to understand: his companion agreed.

They hurried down the corridor, up a flight of stairs.They were soon in the control room.

Ìt looks just the same,' Shepard said.

`How did you think it would look?'

`Well, now we've got - ' Shepard patted the bag - 'this, I thought it would power down. I suppose it's got reserve power, just not enough to take off.'

`You took the words out of my mouth, Adams said, moving around the control panels. 'Which one, which one?'

Ì think it's that red lever.'

`You sure?'

`Yeah.'

The double doors swung open, and the two of them ran out. It was cold outside, the small moon's atmosphere was thin They could see smoke from the settlement.

Adams closed the doors behind him, and when he'd done that, Shepard couldn't see where they'd been.

`How do they ever find the way in?'

`Save your breath for the run back'

Their shuttlecraft was about half a mile away, in the opposite direction to the settlement. They radioed ahead, made sure Morgan was firing up the engines. He could confirm what they could already guess: that the owner of the device they'd just liberated was still at the settlement, investigating rumours of 'time experiments'. Rumours that Adams had carefully seeded the Imperial Datanet with just the other day.

The thin atmosphere cancelled out any benefit of the low gravity, and it took them about six minutes to get back to the shuttle. Shepard was amazed it could be this easy

`Pass the bag up,' Morgan shouted.

`Sorry... I thought I already had done:

As he passed the bag inside for Morgan to take, then clambered in after 158

Adams, Shepard thought how easy it had been. It felt unreal, like some sort of dream.

Morgan and Shepard hurried to the cockpit. The pre-flight checks had been done. All Shepard had to do was flick a row of switches and press one button. Then the shuttlecraft was away, powering up, straight out of that thin atmosphere, straight past that low gravity.

`We've got away with it,' Adams said under his breath, as their shuttle passed into the asteroid belt, and they saw the warp ship waiting for them. 'We actually did it...'

The warp ship was soon on one of the regular trading lanes, indistinguishable from a dozen other warp ships. It was four hours to Gateway Nine Zero Zero One, and they used the time to disassemble the shuttle, putting the pieces through the waste disintegrator and scattering what was left out through the vents into hyperspace. Shepard got a little confused - he kept finding bits he could have sworn he'd already vapourised.

Adams stayed in his quarters with the cylinder, which stayed in the bag.

There was a stasis-field generator in the bag, one that had activated the moment it had been fastened. Adams watched a bank of Schodinger Compensators. If anyone tried to look in the bag, whatever method they used, they'd set off an alarm. None of the needles so much as flickered.

They took the long way round, changed warp ships at Nine Eight Six Six. This ship was more luxurious than the first, and Shepard, Adams and Morgan took it in turns to sample the pleasures. Shepard wasn't interested

in the women on offer here - he had his Celeste, and he'd be seeing her soon enough. It had been three weeks, and the separation was almost physically painful now He'd see her tomorrow.

Their warp ship docked at Nine Zero Zero One ten minutes ahead of schedule. The three of them remembered the route to their contact the previous night. They pushed their way past the various travellers,

shoppers, refugees and merchants who populated every Gateway station.

Humans, aliens, robots... all sorts of people were here.

Shepard lost track of Adams and Morgan in the crowd for a moment.

Damn it. He decided to press on. He knew where they were headed, after all.

He paused. Something was wrong. He tried to remember.

He looked around. Everything looked very familiar. It was that sense of

deja vu. Again.

But someone was missing.A man... and a pretty girl.

He shook himself. He was a one-woman man, and he'd be seeing Celeste soon enough.

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The other two were waiting for him at the rendezvous point, a little impatiently.

`Got a little lost: Shepard confessed.

Adams and Morgan smiled at each other.

`Luckily we're a little early:Adams said.

Òur clients are due... now:

Shepard had a quantum moment of utter panic.

`Concentrate;Adams's voice warned from above.

`Sorry, boss. I feel a bit trapped.Wait... we've done this before:

`Yeah... '

He looked around.Those power lines looked like the bars of a cell.Then the cylinder came away, and Adams gently lifted it down. Careful not to brush against any of the power lines, Shepard took it off him. It was a metre long, half as broad, exactly like he'd expected. He

held it steady as his partner detached the last couple of cables from its top. Shepard opened up the carpet bag, but hesitated.

'Deja vu,' the two of them said.

Ì should be thinking that this thing would be heavier. But I knew just how heavy it would be'

Ìt's heavier on the inside:

Ì know that. But how do I know that? That's all I'm asking.'

Shepard slipped the cylinder into the bag, carefully fastened it up, then inched his way out of the machinery and into the corridor. The gleaming white was just as he expected.

Adams had joined him, and took the bag off him You don't have to understand; he assured him

`We need to get out of here before they miss that thing.That's the only thing you need to understand'

Èr... yeah:Adams agreed.

They hurried down the corridor, up a flight of stairs and sure enough, they were soon in the control room.

Ì think it's that red lever: Shepard said.

`How did you think it would look?'Adams began. Then he frowned.

"That's not what I asked'

Ì know.'

`We've done this before: Shepard insisted.

`You sure?'

`Yeah:

The double doors swung open, and the two of them ran out. It was cold outside, the small moon's atmosphere was thin They could see smoke from the settlement.

Adams closed the doors behind him, and when he'd done that,

couldn't see where they'd been, but instead of asking, he saved his breath for the run back.

Their shuttlecraft was about half a mile away, in the opposite direction to the settlement.They didn't need to radio ahead, they knew Morgan was firing up the engines and that he could confirm that the owner of the device they'd just liberated was still at the settlement, investigating rumours of 'time experiments'.

The thin atmosphere cancelled out any benefit of the low gravity, and it took them about six minutes to get back to the shuttle. It felt like less.

Then again, journeys along familiar roads always do. For a moment, Shepard wondered if he really was repeating events. But as he passed the bag inside for Morgan to take, then clambered in after Adams, he remembered doing it all before.

Morgan and Shepard hurried to the cockpit. The pre-flight checks had been done. All Shepard had to do was flick a row of switches and press one button. Then the shuttlecraft was away, powering up, straight out of that thin atmosphere, straight past that low gravity.

`We're trapped,'Adams said under his breath, as their shuttle passed into the asteroid belt, and they saw the warp ship waiting for them. Ìt must be this rotor malfunctioning...'

The warp ship was soon on one of the regular trading lanes, indistinguishable from a dozen other warp ships. It was four hours to Gateway Nine Zero Zero One, and they used the time to disassemble the shuttle, putting the pieces through the waste disintegrator and scattering what was left out through the vents into hyperspace.

Adams stayed in his quarters with the cylinder, which stayed in the bag.

There was a stasis-field generator in the bag, one that had activated the moment it had been fastened. Adams watched a bank of Schodinger Compensators. If anyone tried to look in the bag, whatever method they used, they'd set off an alarm. None of the needles so much as flickered.

They took the long way round, changed warp ships at Nine Eight Six Six. This ship was more luxurious than the first, and Shepard, Adams and Morgan took it in turns to sample the pleasures. Shepard wasn't interested in the women on offer here - he'd realised something. They

weren't endlessly repeating themselves Each cycle was half the length of the last. He suddenly felt like a spider swirling down a plughole. He was trapped. He'd never see Celeste again.

Shepard had a quantum moment of utter panic.

`Concentrate:Adams's voice warned from above.

`Sorry, boss. I feel a bit trapped. I never liked confined spaces'

`Now he tells me'

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Then the cylinder came away, and Adams gently lifted it down. Careful not to brush against any of the power lines, Shepard took it off him and held it steady as his partner detached the last couple of cables from its top. Shepard opened up the carpet bag, but hesitated.

`We can't do this'

'Eh?'

`We're being punished. It's the Time Lords'

Shepard slipped the cylinder into the bag, carefully fastened it up, then inched his way out of the machinery and into the corridor. The gleaming white was such a contrast that he spent a moment or two blinking.

`We're trapped.That's what the Doctor was warning me about'

Adams had joined him, and took the bag off him. 'What do you mean trapped? Look. We're not trapped anywhere:

Ì don't understand it...' Shepard admitted.

`You don't have to understand,' he assured him.

They hurried down the corridor, up a flight of stairs.

Ìt looks just the same,' Shepard said.

`How did you think it would look?' he said, pulling the red lever.

`Wait... you see what I mean? Why did you just pull the red lever?'

`Because you told me to. Come on... you're getting jittery. Only you could get claustrophobic inside something that's infinitely large'

The double doors swung open, and the two of them ran out. It was cold outside, the small moon's atmosphere was thin. They could see smoke from the settlement.

Their shuttlecraft was about half a mile away, in the opposite direction to the settlement. They radioed ahead, made sure Morgan was firing up the engines. He could confirm that the owner of the device they'd just liberated was still at the settlement, investigating rumours of 'time experiments'. Rumours that Adams had carefully seeded the Imperial Datanet with just the other day. But Shepard could feel a greater game was being played. He, Adams and Morgan had been scooped up, placed in a sliver of time.

The thin atmosphere cancelled out any benefit of the low gravity, and it took them about six minutes to get back to the shuttle.

Morgan and Shepard hurried to the cockpit. The pre-flight checks had been done. All Shepard had to do was flick a row of switches and press one button.Then the shuttlecraft was away, powering up, straight out that thin atmosphere, straight past that low gravity. For a moment, Shepard wondered if they could ever escape. But they weren't trapped in space. If they got to the warp ship, they could get light years away, tens of light years... but they'd still be trapped in time.This was a prison cell made of time instead of bricks.

`We've got away with it,' Adams said under his breath, as their shuttle passed into the asteroid belt, and they saw the warp ship waiting for them. 'We actually did it...'

Shepard had a quantum moment of utter panic.

`Concentrate,' Adams's voice warned from above.

`We're trapped. We have to get out:

Then the cylinder came away.

`We can still take it,'Adams told him. Ìf we run, we can get away.'

Careful not to brush against any of the power lines, Shepard took it off him. It was about a metre long, perhaps half as broad. He held it

steady as his partner detached the last couple of cables from its top. It was surprisingly light. Shepard opened up the carpet bag, but hesitated.

`You shouldn't have taken that'

`Well, I did it now, we can't change the past'

`Perhaps we can. Not this time. Next time'

Shepard slipped the cylinder into the bag, carefully fastened it up, then inched his way out of the machinery and into the corridor. The gleaming white was such a contrast that he spent a moment or two blinking.

Adams had joined him, and took the bag off him. 'You don't have to understand; he assured him.

`We need to get out of here'

`That's the only thing you need to understand:Adams agreed.

They hurried down the corridor, up a flight of stairs.

Àre you sure this is the way?'Adams asked.

Ì know what we should do:

Sure enough, they were soon in the control room.

Ìt looks just the same, Shepard said. 'We're about to start again.They did catch us. This is the punishment. To endlessly repeat our last few moments. We have to remember. Next time, don't remove the rotor.'

Shepard had a quantum moment of utter panic.

`Concentrate;Adams's voice warned from above.

`Don't remove the rotor!'

`Now he tells me'

Then the cylinder came away, and Adams gently lifted it down. Careful not to brush against any of the power lines, Shepard took it off him It was about a metre long, perhaps half as broad. He held it steady as his partner detached the last couple of cables from its top. Shepard hesitated.

"That was our last chance'

`You sure?'

Ì'm sure.The next time, there won't be any time to warn you'

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Shepard had a quantum moment of utter panic.

`Seconds now:Adams's voice warned from above.

`We're going to be trapped here forever. I never liked confined spaces.'

`We don't have any time to stop - '

Shepard had a quantum moment of utter

panic.

"This is it:Adams's voice warned from above.

Shepard had a quantum moment of utter panic.

Moment of utter panic.

Utter panic.

Panic.

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The Ruins of Heaven

Marc Platt

'If this is Heaven,' said Peri when they first arrived, 'which way are all the dead people?'

`Dead people?' The Doctor eyed the Tourist Information map warily.

That could be embarrassing.'

The map made no mention of the dearly departed. Instead, it announced in rich thespian tones: *'Heaven, this particular Heaven, since there are several disputed sites, is located on Sheol, the single inhabited world circling the star Achshaph in the Ramshorn*

`Sir John Gielgud,' observed the Doctor. 'He'll never be short of work.'

Renowned for its religious antiquities and miraculous architecture, Heaven is also famed for its markets, health spa, and historic Gates of Pearl shrine. Attracting cure-seekers and shoppers from all over the galaxy, Heaven makes the ideal stop-off en route to the Pleasure Domes and star-soaked beaches of Old Xanadu or the Blessed Clouds of Gideon. Sponsored by Bluebliss Holidays, Inc.'

`Great, said Peri:Looks like the angels have moved out.'

The Doctor sniffed disapprovingly. And the marketing moguls have moved in:

Heaven wasn't warm so they'd taken their coats. But not as cold as Hell, as the guide had pointed out.That was before she'd stomped off in a fit of pique.

This time the Doctor had really done it. He and Peri had tagged along behind the party of tourists, which had seemed like a great idea: Peri's idea, in fact; anything to get a break from the Doctor's demonstrative opinions. But they'd hardly reached the end of the first block on Paradise Prospekt before he started complaining. First, he called for the tour guide to speak up, insisting those at the back couldn't hear. Several of the party agreed, which only encouraged him.The guide, a young woman kilted out as a sort of hermit with a flowing silver beard and sackcloth robes, carried *a* rough-hewn staff with a red parasol perched on top. Her name badge called her St Albans. She eyed Peri and the Doctor with saintly irritation, before resuming her commentary.

All the way along the route, past rococo facades of crumbling magnificence, over little bridges spanning canals filled not with water but cloud, across cloistered piazzas where market stalls sold the unimaginable, all the Doctor did was criticise. This date was wrong; that fact was spurious; the place was festering in a tide of commercial

hyperbole; they'd have got a far better view if they'd turned left at the last *trivium.*

`Quiet,' muttered Peri, but the Doctor had that pursed-lip look 01

determined indignation that she'd grown to realise always meant trouble .

She met the guide's glare with a feeble smile, and tried to look interested.

The perpetual smell of incense was starting to make her feel sick.

Just ahead, there was another band of tourists with another guide Most of them were neither young nor human; all of them seemed to be ignoring the commentary and looking for photo opportunities. And behind, there was yet another group and Peri could hear their guide reciting the same commentary that St Albans had reeled off to them only three minutes before. She was trapped on a treadmill.

They were mounting the steps of the cobalt blue Palace of Ethereal Wisdom (apparently in the Raeonese style), when St Albans turned and flung out an expansive arm towards the view behind them 'Behold the City of Heaven, she cried.

The city was mountainous, stretching ever upwards: palace upon palace, temple upon temple, lit in the hues of an eternal dawn, their foundations set in cloud. Gold and silver glinted on the domes.A flock of tiny pink birds soared far above, and were lost in the haze. The group let out a collective sigh of satisfaction.

`Shame about the high-rise hotels,' muttered Peri. And she nodded towards a duster of tower blocks stacked up on the eastern horizon.

`Suburbs,' observed the Doctor sourly 'Heaven, the *real* Heaven, is just an ideal. A comforting pipe dream. Not like this at all: There was a gasp of shock from the group.The Doctor was being too loud again.

`Doctor, shut up!'And then Peri realised that he was actually addressing their fellow tourists, most of whose jaws were dropping in disbelief.

`This place is a fantasy. It's just pretend.'

Peri prayed for the steps to open up and swallow her whole:Keep your voice down. It's like shouting in church...'

Ì have total respect for people's faiths, Peri. But this so-called Heaven is not what it purports to be. It's a cheap theme park imitation based on the Baroque school, without any hint of artistic restraint or taste!'

Laughter echoed up from the piazza below. A seven-foot-high cherub with golden curls, its rubbery features exaggerated and cartoon-like, was shaking hands with tourists. It turned and waved up at them, a

cute smile on its chubby face. It reminded Peri of someone, but she couldn't think whom.

Sir? Are you with Ambrosial Tours?' St Albans had come right up to them

`No,' said Peri quickly. 'We just tagged along. It's erm... interesting'

Ìt's a fraud,' declared the Doctor.

À fraud?' St Albans's tone was glacial:Do you have your entry visas?'

`Visas? I thought the Kingdom of Heaven was open to all.'

Peri cringed under the scrutiny of the other tourists. *Oh God,* she prayed to no avail. *Please, PLEASE make him shut up!*

It just got worse. The Doctor knew that he was now the centre of attention and, naturally, loved it. 'You see, most of what you have told us about this city has either been unfounded or untrue: He patted St Albans's hand reassuringly 'Don't worry my dear, I realise your commentary was written by somebody else. I couldn't possibly hold you responsible for its wilful inaccuracy.As for this place? Well, I've seen holier sieves'

St Albans shook her beard in disbelief. 'The City of Heaven was founded at the start of the Third Epoch by the Levitican Fathers, they who discovered the Gates of Pearl on their pilgrimage to the Blessed Clouds in the Constellation of Gideon. We'll have a chance to visit and pass through the Gates themselves in the Parc des Portes after lunch - queues permitting:

Òh, please!' spluttered the Doctor. 'Those gates were purely ceremonial. Clearly left over from some earlier and long-vanished civilisation. The Fathers have misinterpreted their significance:

`Say, bud; interjected one of the tourists, a turtleheaded guy in a tartan shirt, 'if you know so much, maybe you should take over the tour?

Peri bit her tongue.The Doctor waved his arms in a fit of modesty 'Oh, no. No, no, no, I couldn't possibly.'

`Please do,' snapped St Albans, clearly incensed. 'After all, who am I? Just **a** mere volunteer.'

`You mean you don't even get paid?'

`We have the conviction of our belief; said the guide and thrust her staff with the red umbrella into the Doctor's hand:Let's see where scepticism gets you:And she stalked away down the steps.

`No!' called the Doctor. Please wait. I didn't mean...' But he was left in the centre of a mob of angry tourists.

That was when Peri had had enough too. `Sorry, Doctor; she shrugged.

Ì'm going to do some exploring on my own. See you later... back at the TARDIS: She didn't need to see his open-mouthed exasperation. She just heard his little gasp of helpless astonishment behind her as she headed down the steps and across the sunny piana.

'Peri! Be careful!'

`Yeah, yeah, yeah...' But she hadn't gone far down the steps before she **had** to suppress a smile. She suddenly knew who the huge golden-curled cherub with its goofy walk and silly wave had reminded her of.

She was finally starting to come to terms with the Doctor's eccentricities - well, some of them anyhow. Not only did he have an extraordinary ability to avert terrible disasters, he could cause them as

well. As much as fighting villains and monsters, he was often fighting himself. The bluster was just on the surface. Deep down, the goodness in him was innate.

It was just that once in a while, just for once, it would be really great to know something that the Doctor didn't. Or at least, that he didn't admit to knowing. It didn't have to be anything universe-shattering: just something that was hers, not his, no matter how small. Just occasionally, she wanted not to be just the sidekick. "That's an awful lot of justs,' she could hear him saying.

And deep and dark inside herself, she felt a gnawing guilt - an awareness that the Doctor had once given one of his lives so that she didn't die. And it had changed him forever. However impossible he'd become, she owed him so much. She felt sorry for him and thought she'd buy him an ice cream to atone.

She heard a flutter of wings and something chuckled behind her. The wordless voice of a baby. But when she turned, there was no one near. In the distance, the Doctor was leading his group of disciples up the steps into the blue palace. Better hurry, Doctor. The next tour on the treadmill was already shuffling past Peri. It would soon catch him up.

At the bottom of her shoulder bag, Peri found an old pair of sunglasses and put them on, immediately feeling more at home as a tourist.

And then she remembered the watch.The golden fob watch and chain that he'd worn in his waistcoat, that she'd trodden on as he'd heaved her over a wall on the planet Necros. He'd placed it in a folded velvet cloth with a look of melancholy reverence and left it in a box in his workshop.

Once he'd gone off to tinker elsewhere, she'd slipped it into her bag in the vain hope of finding somewhere to get it mended.

As she crossed the square, heading back to the market, a sign on one of the pillars caught her attention.

DO NOT FEED THE PUTTI

MINIMUM PENALTY: 10 PUBLIC GENUFLEXIONS

Peri squinted to decipher what someone had scrawled across the bottom of the sign. Something like *Only The Dead Sea... Ankles.* She wasn't sure what a putti was or what the Dead Sea or ankles had to do with it.

The market was amazing Everywhere there were souvenirs, mass-produced models of cathedrals and palaces and pearly gates, all brightly painted. Angel dolls and angel books, hermit dolls and action saints, sandals, tee shirts and robes. My *boyfriend went to Heaven and all I got*

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was this lousy vestment. Luscious fruit, vegetables, loaves, fishes. Local produced manna. Nothing was priced. And if she got too close or looked too interested, all the stall-holders would say was 'how much?'

Peri began to feel uncomfortable about it all. She wasn't sure who was selling. Them or her? And there was nowhere you could get a broken watch mended. It was getting hot. The smell of incense never went away and all along the tops of the stalls, there were lines of plastic spikes to stop the birds from landing.

The further in she went, the more nervous she got. *I'm not so easily shocked,* she thought, but there were things that had no place here. Not in Heaven. Not even in Heaven's suburbs. Cruelly angular implements, all rusting - souvenirs of the Inquisition. Bars and clubs with darkened doorways, through which she glimpsed scantily dad figures and heard exotic music, or the clatter of the gaming table. Neon signs for *The Flesh* and *The Pleasures.* Dancers dressed as hellish creatures from paintings by Hieronymous Bosch - or at least, she *hoped* they were in costume. Stall-holders reached towards her, rubbing their grubby fingers, winking their grubby eyes, making her feel dirty too. A sign above a stall offered *The Souls of Men.* And another, *Instant Salvation Certificates Now (No Questions Asked).* Everything was on sale here, and that included her.

She rounded another corner and saw the huge entrance to a church basilica rising above the market stalls. Solid and ancient, its great wooden doors were open, guarded by stone saints in attitudes of devotion. She hurried for sanctuary. Inside, the service was just starting, so she took a back pew, relieved at the chance to get her head back together.

It was cool inside. Vaults of stone rose in dean lines above her and anthems from the choir soared up through them on clouds of incense, tangibly mingling with the rainbow light that fell in shafts from the coloured windows. Peri felt the weight lift from her shoulders. It was comforting here. She thought of church-going at home when she was a kid, although she'd always had to be frog-marched to that. And Sunday church in Baltimore had always been more of a social than a religious event. Not grand like here, where worship was turned into High Art. The sermon at home was the penance you sat through before you got to go out and play, or went to McDonald's for lunch.These days, sermons from the Doctor were a daily event. She was having doubts already.

This Heaven, whatever it had become, was an Earthbound place. An exclusively Westernised place, filled with the trappings of an idealised Catholicism and Protestantism. The Doctor was right. It wasn't truthful.

This was Heaven World, manufactured and commercialised. It was a parade, already tainted with the earthly greeds of humanity. Other faiths had Heaven too. So where were they? Were there other segregated Heavens elsewhere? Maybe the only real Heaven was in your head.

All around, the congregation of alien tourists were kneeling to pray. But try as Peri did, no prayer would come into her head. The well-worn hassock was hard on her knees. So where were all the dead souls? If this 169

was real Heaven, she might meet her grandma again, or Jodie Blauberg, her friend who'd died in a car crash when she was fourteen, or Abraham Lincoln.And she might even find the Doctor here, her first Doctor, the tall, handsome, apologetic Doctor who had died for her.

It was no good. Her faith was internal, not of the organised outward variety The incense and vaulting anthems stifled it. She stood up, ignoring the collection plate and left the church in mid-hymn.

It was even hotter outside. She skirted the side of the market until she reached a wide-open park of brown grass, where a sign announced that she had reached the Elysian Fields Litter scuttered across it in the breeze.

A long line of people was processing across the parkland. One white wheelchair after another, each pushed by a uniformed nurse, each containing a patient wrapped in shawls or blankets, some alert, some lolling, some human All apparently seeking a miracle cure in this place...

Peri hesitated to call it *holy,* but despite all the commercial trappings, there was still evidence of faith. Maybe this Heaven could provide the sick or dying with a remedy, divine or otherwise, that their doctors could not.

Overhead, the huge sky billowed with mountainous clouds, palaces and courtesy coaches.The flock of pink birds flickered high up across the sun.

And what Peri saw next brought her up short.

Across the park, two angels were hovering just above a crowd of tourists. Huge eagle wings carried them, striking majestically back and forth with regal power. Their robes of dark gold swirled around them defying the laws of gravity. Peri just stood open-mouthed. It was all true.

Heaven did exist, and she was there. She felt her eyes moisten at the glory of the two ethereal creatures.

Then one of them swooped, picked up one of the tourists in its arms and lifted him aloft.The boy waved as his baseball cap fell off, posing with the grinning angels for the rest of his family to take photos.'Hi Mom, look at me and the fairy!' When they were done, the angel lowered him to the ground and scooped up another. More posing, more pictures.To the side, another 'hermit' was taking money for the privilege of an angelic flight.

`Come in now, Raphael,' he shouted. 'Your anti-gray's due for recharging.'

Peri found she couldn't hate the place. It was all too human. Incense mingled with the smell of frying burgers, like Coney Island with religious overtones. But she'd had enough; she was going back to the TARDIS.

She started back along Paradise Prospekt, pushing her way through the crowds until she reached a courtyard where the time machine was parked.The police box was still there, but there was no sign of the Doctor.

Typical, she thought. She'd probably land up having to bail him out of jail for upsetting tourists. She sat on a bench and waited, drawing lines in the hot dust with her shoe.

After a moment, she heard the chuckle of the child again and something 170

fluttered close, skimming her head. She struggled to her feet in pain, staring round angrily. On top of the TARDIS sat a small pink baby. It was naked, with little ice-grey wings sprouting from behind its shoulders.

Straight out of a painting. Golden hair, blue eyes, and a lop-sided smirk on its face.

Warily, Peri returned its stare. 'Hello. What do you want?'

The cherub cocked his head on one side in a provocatively impudent manner.

Peri felt something trickling through her hair. She put her hand and got blood on her fingers. The cherub gave another little chuckle, which was answered from down beside Peri's leg. A second cherub had landed on her shoulder bag, and was rummaging through the contents.

Peri yelled and struck out at the infant angel. He fluttered up into the air, pulling her precious silk scarf with him and furling it to and fro just above her head. 'Hey, quit that! Just grow up, will you! Give me that back!'

She lunged helplessly and then snatched up her bag, clutching it tight.The cherub reeked of incense.

Peri turned back to the TARDIS. Six of the creatures were now sitting along its roof, with one more lounging against the top light. Another fluttered down and joined him They were exchanging chuckles amongst themselves - clearly sizing her up as they studied her with cornflower-coloured eyes.

`What do you want? I don't have anything for you!' The blood ran

into Peri's eye and stung. She turned to run back to the safety of the crowds on the Prospekt, but another cherub flew in her face, swooping wildly in front of her, forcing her back towards the TARDIS.The heady vapour from its wings choked her.

The crowd from the police box roof now numbered over a dozen or more of the little naked monsters, and had spilled down to the courtyard surrounding it. Peri faltered, unable to find an escape route.As the cherub behind her dive-bombed again, the others rose up, flying around her in a crowd. She stumbled past the ship, heading along a thin alley with cherubs pinching and pulling at her clothes with chubby little fingers. She tried to turn left, but they blocked her path, driving her forward. She was running blind, only the beating of a flock of wings and the gleeful chuckling of the bloodthirsty little vermin filling her head.Then they were in front of her too, and she fell back against the wall. Nowhere to go.

Nausea from the incense turned her stomach. She swung out uselessly with her bag as they closed in. She doubled over, falling against rough splintering wood.The door gave under her weight. She tumbled sideways into darkness and several seconds' drop before hitting the floor.

Peri lay for an age waiting for the pain to start. It was quiet. Far above her, 171

the white shape of the broken door had been torn all jagged from the darkness into which she'd fallen.

Nothing stirred. No sign of the cherubs. And the overpowering stench of the incense had lifted. She guessed she'd have problems finding a way out of here, but it was warm and surprisingly comfortable in the dark.The warmth fitted snugly round her. No need to move. No need to do anything. No one's looking. Just another half hour.

`Perpugilliam

Brown. Just look at the state of you. Get up now.' For a moment she saw how absurd she must look lying there on the floor, gathering dust like a dropped doll. How long had she been there? People would be looking for her. People at home had probably been looking for years. Lost at sea. Presumed dead. One day she'd be late for her own funeral. So get up now!

Okay, okay. No need to get all teachery with herself. She didn't have

an essay to hand in.

It took a real effort to haul herself up out of the warm. She still felt light-headed, but that was only to be expected. She'd had a shock after all.The place was big, like a warehouse. Around her stood large box shapes like crates, but they weren't solid.They were barred with metal.They gleamed dully in the light from the broken door above.The crates were cages, like the old-style wagons that used to carry circus animals. She edged round one and peered into the gloom inside, relieved to find it long unoccupied.

There was a sign on the bars of another: **MANTICORES. HANDLERS MUST WEAR**

PROTECTIVE ARMOUR. And further on: **WINGED LIONS.** Do **NOT FEED.** But there was nothing except old sawdust on the floor and hard steel roofs.

Something glinted by her foot. She stooped and picked up a golden feather. It weighed heavily enough to be real metal, but it gave off a pale glow. She studied its intricate formation, astonished by the artistry and skill that had fashioned it, guessing that it was from one of the lions. It couldn't be real. It was all for show, another part of the Disney-style parade.

But the feather was beautiful and strangely real. When she held it up, it lit her way into the darker corners. Round the warehouse she went, but the only door she found was metal and had no handle or lock. And there was no sign of any ladder she could use to reach the broken door.

The cages, all empty, filled the space. Nothing but a maze of cages. 'Oh, come on,' she prayed. 'Please, just get me out of here!' She had begun to retrace her path, guided by the glow of the feather, when she heard movement: something shifting slightly. It came from a cage in the darkest corner. Unlike the other cages, it was bent and crumpled. Its roof was beaten down at the edges, so that the inside was enclosed and hidden.

Peri shielded the feather for a moment. There was a glimmer coming from inside the battered cage. 'Hello?' she called.

Silence.Then the briefest rustle.

`Hello? Is somebody there?'

Further silence. And then, `No'

voice was neither male nor female.

Just a voice inside the cage.

- I' m lost,' stuttered Peri:Is there some way out of here?'

`No!'

Òh, come on. Please.There must be a way out. Can't you just tell me?'

`No. I neither help nor exist.

`For God's sake; complained Peri to herself.

`Stop it! Stop that now! I've had enough of that. The constant drone is bad enough without you actually turning up on the doorstep in person.'

The vehemence of the outburst astonished Peri:I'm sorry,' she said.'lf I could just get out then you'd be left alone again:

There was another silence. She crouched and squinted through the gap between the floor and the lip of the battered-down roof.

A slender creature was sitting bunched up in the farthest corner of the cage, its arms hugging its long legs. Its naked skin had a glimmering sheen that lit the inside of its tiny prison. It was not simply human-like Human was just a start. It was far more than that. More than just woman or man, something that humans could only dream of aspiring to be. But its shoulder-length hair, golden like shot silk, was matted with filthy straw. It quickly turned its face away, but its eyes soon led back to her. Huge, frantic eyes in a face that was unbelievably, unbearably beautiful. So beautiful that it was hard to look at directly. Peri decided, despite the lack of any visible evidence, to think of the creature as a He.

'Don't look. Don't look!'

Sorry,' said Peri again. She felt totally insignificant in his presence.

The creature was shaking with fear. His eyes turned to look at her and she was lost in their depths. 'Can you see me?' he asked as if he could scarcely believe it.

`You're beautiful; Peri whispered.

The creature gave a long sigh and his shoulders sank:Oh, poor soul:

`Who? Me or you? Just... Please; I just want to get out of here' She faltered:Sorry, that's an awful lot of justs,' she mumbled.

He shook its head:It's a lot of sorries too.' His eyes stared fixedly at the floor:But that's the first thing people always say?

`What?'

And was the world still as vile and corrupt when you left it?'The depths of those eyes again. They were full of sorrow. 'Who sent you over? As if I couldn't guess.'

`No one. No one sent me. I was attacked.A load of horrible things came after me. Like flying babies. But that's crazy, isn't it?'

`Putti?'The androgynous creature looked very alarmed.

`What? I don't know. What are putti? These were like the cherubs you see in paintings.'

`What did *they* want with you?'

Ì was waiting for a friend and they just flew in. I had to run.That's when I fell in here.'

Ìt was an accident. Not deliberate: He sounded defensive.

Peri started to clamber under the lip of the roof:I don't know what you mean. Are you stuck in here too?'

He pulled back and threw out a hand. Go away!'

Ì can't!' She stopped herself, hearing the panic. She took a deep breath.

`My name is Peri'

He sighed again. 'Poor sweet soul; I'm sorry too. Your name is Perpugilliam Brown from Baltimore, United States of America, Earth...'

Àn‌d you can stop right there 'A real anger blazed up in her. Ì don't want you in my head! Whoever you are'

'In *your* head? What about *my* head? Do *I* have any choice?' The creature's hands went up to press against its temples. The skin of his slender fingers was all stained with rainbow colour, as if he'd dabbled them in paint or dye. He made whimpering noises and was trembling.

Peri pulled herself further into the cage. `Look, I'm sorry. What can I do to help?'The creature was pressing itself against the back wall:You know who I am.You must have a name too'

He winced and gave a little cry. 'There are fifteen million, ninety-one thousand, eight hundred and fifty-two people on Skopta Maxima praying for deliverance from invading swarms of scissor bugs. There are three thousand, four hundred and thirty-six people on the Marches of Graeae Four giving thanks for the rain that saved their crops. There are eleven thousand, four hundred and sixteen people on Earth praying for the rain to hold off to save their Test Match...'

`Stop it!' said Peri. 'You're making it up:

`You don't have to listen to it,' he snapped:What about the woman on Mars Colony praying for her father not to die of cancer? Or the man on a space shuttle praying that his wife doesn't find a love letter in his jacket from his boyfriend...'

`How can you know?'

Ì hear them.All the prayers at every moment. We all do'

She studied him hard:Are you some sort of angel?'

`What about the woman on Androzani Minor praying for the man in the mask not to touch her? Or the same woman trapped in a ventilation shaft on N'Tia, praying to be sent back home? Or that same woman standing on the steps of the palace on Sheol, who prayed for her friend to shut up? Or just now, praying to get out of the dark warehouse?'

He heard that, thought Peri. He overheard *all* that. 'Those were private .

Who gave you the right to listen in?'

All prayers have an address on them,' said the creature.

`So what does that make you? God's private secretary?' She pulled away from the edge of the cage. Ì don't have to stay here. I'll find my own way out:

His voice called in desperation to her from his prison. 'You don't understand. It was an accident. Don't go and look! Come back!' But she held up the golden feather, using it to find her way between the cages towards the falling light from the broken door.

She stopped as she reached the place. Something heavy was lying on the floor below the door. Splintered wood was scattered around it, and there was a shoulder bag with its contents spilling out. The shape lay at an awkward angle. It didn't move. It was wearing her coat.

Peri stood for minutes, staring down at her broken body, lying where she'd left it, unable to make any sense of the reactions and thoughts cannoning round her head

Oh, God, please make Mom be all right. Please make the Doctor be all right. I never said I was sorry to him. I never finished my botanical studies. This isn't right. There are so many things I haven't done yet. It can't be right. I never got back from vacation. Who's going to water the plants now?

And then, *What am I doing here? If I'm dead, why isn't there a tunnel with light at the end of it?And* the only answer she could think of was, *Because I'm in Heaven already.*

She looked up.A child's head was framed in the gash of light where the door had been. It made a chuckling noise and a second head joined it to stare down at her. They were waiting. It was no accident. She turned and went back into the dark, holding her feather in front of her like a candle.

`You'd better come in,' said the creature in the cage. 'You've had a shock'

Peri crawled in under the lip of the battered cage roof. She sat on the floor next to the glimmering naked creature. There was a warmth from him. He was so beautiful.

Ì suppose you heard all that family stuff too,' she apologised.

Ùnderstandable. Even I pray sometimes'

They sat in silence. 'I don't know what to do,' she said at last. 'Don't know what to think. What happens now? The Doctor will be worried.

He'll be upset. He'll blame himself. Can I hide down here with you?'

`Hide?' The creature pointed upwards. Peri looked up. Stars and angels gazed down at her. A heavenly host daubed in bright smudgy colours all across the inside of the metal roof, hovering just above their heads.

`Did you do this?' asked Peri.The images were oddly comforting. Better than that, they were distracting.

`My name was Yy,' answered the creature and studied his coloured fingers:I no longer exist:

`There was a sign in the market; Peri added. *'Only the Dead Sea... I* thought it said *ankles.* But it was *angels.* Wish I had a built-in spellcheck.

Only the dead see angels: She looked up at the painted throng above:But you're not an angel.You don't have wings.'

Ì pulled the roof in. I beat it down with my fists. So no one could see inside:

`To keep the outside out?'

Yy winced again:On Aktm in the Sojussa system, the Kings are choosing the yearly sacrifice to the angry sea. Five billion, seventy-three million, nine thousand, one hundred and seven people are praying it is not them.'

`Doesn't really work, does it?' she said:Tell me what happened. I don't want to talk about myself:

`1(y *was* an angel in the guardian hosts, a lieutenant in Amethyst Flight, charged with the administration of newly arrived souls. Their allocation and settlement in the afterworld?

À desk job?' suggested Peri.

He shrugged his exquisite shoulders:Yy had never set wing outside the delectable realm. An innocent untutored in worldly ways. But the others laughed at him:

`Why? Don't suppose they were any wiser?'

`Because once he complained. No one had ever complained before'

`Must have been a good reason. I never stop complaining. It doesn't mean I'm unhappy.'

'Yy so loved his job that he complained he wanted to do more.And they just laughed. He tried for a post as Selector in the Reincarnation Department, but he was so good at easing the passage of transmigrating souls that he was passed over. No shame or sorrow. He had to be content in his place'

Peri tried to sympathise:They obviously really valued his... *your* work.

Ànd then, one fateful day, the Believers of the living universe discovered the location of Heaven's great gates. From that moment, the universe changed. Belief became truth. Pilgrims came to the new shrine and a great city grew up all around. A city in the image of Heaven, magnificent, but tainted by the living, by their greed and vice:

Peri nodded:That's this place.This cityThe Doctor called it the suburbs of Heaven.'

Indeed:A note of sourness edged into Yy's voice:And a vile and wicked place it is too. Full of sin and temptation for the unwary. It was **a** catastrophe. Just imagine. The State of Heaven itself and all its Mysteries were threatened.A new realm had to be sought elsewhere.'

`Don't see why'

`The Ministers of Grace who govern the true realm of Heaven chose to withdraw to another place, where it would remain pure and unassailed.

And its Mysteries would be preserved .'

Pride before a fall, she thought. Isn't pride a sin? 'But that's just isolating yourselves. Cutting yourself off from your fan base. And everything left behind turned into a tourist attraction.'

Ì was talking about Yy; insisted Yy.

Peri shrugged:Still think it was a big mistake. People want proof of their beliefs!

Ìt... was... decided; he snapped, 'that an annunciation must be made: Òkay.That's traditional!

Yy's words were starting to falter. À proclamation would be issued as to the relocation of the realm of Heaven: He stared up at the painted hosts of Heaven.

`Go on; said Peri. 'What happened? What was the reaction?'

He opened and dosed his mouth. His fingers locked and unlocked.

When he spoke his voice was dry and cracked. 'It never came: Peri leaned over and took his hand. It was smooth and cool.

Ì have never spoken to anyone of this, Yy said. His imploring eyes met hers.They were full of lost love.

`Was it you?' she asked. And his head nodded vigorously. His voice was clogged with the tears of millennia.

`Yy was chosen for that greatest honour. Something new to do at last.

But taking flight over the city outside for the first time, visible to the world, Yy went down into the marketplace. The wares on sale there fascinated and beguiled the innocent angel.Yy saw so many things that he neither knew, nor understood for their dangers. Forbidden things. Worldly things.Things that are secret in Heaven to a mere lieutenant in the lower hosts. Yy was an ethereal, knowing nothing of greed or desire or...' The angel shuddered. 'Or all those forbidden fruits of the flesh. Yy was just a messenger.'

He stopped to wipe his ethereal nose.'But Yy desired just one taste. One sip of knowledge. The darkest knowledge.The flesh' His voice coarsened with contempt —It'll cost yer," said the stallsman. "I have nothing to give,"

said Yy. And the stallsman thought for a moment. "You got a fine set of feathers there," said he."Fme enough to make a coat!"

`You didn't?' said Peri.

Yy swallowed hard. He shuffled in the straw, dragging himself on his hands, slowly turning his back on her. Between his shoulders were two crimson wounds - not bleeding, but raw as meat on a butcher's slab. He hunched forward and wept uncontrollably.

Peri slid her arm round his lower back and hugged him for a while. `So your annunciation never got made'

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Ànd the universe is lost, he cried:No one knows that Heaven has gone away.'

She sighed. 'They can't blame you. Sounds like the whole of Heaven needs to go on a customer-relations course: She hugged him again and passed him a hanky. `So was it worth it? Whatever it was you paid for?'

Ìt was filthy. I spat it out.'

Òh,' she said, trying either to cover her embarrassment or spare herself his. `That's okay. I don't need to know...'

`The flesh I damned all of Creation for a taste of it.Aren't you shocked?'

`Well, that's temptation for you:

`No one told me. I didn't know how much I'd want it or need it. Thai urge of desiring and craving. The gorgeous, grinding appetite inside. I couldn't resist. So I did it, without a thought. Sold my beautiful golden wings, gave *everything* away!'

`But what for?'

He doubled forward in grief:For the bite of a cheeseburger: Peri nearly laughed. 'Is that all?'

Èverything. Just everything: And he went on weeping.

With or without fries? she thought. She waited until the crying subsided, which was a while. 'I just realised. I suppose I'm a ghost now.'

He snuffled:You will be if you stay around here. Why didn't you follow the tunnel up towards the light?'

`There wasn't a tunnel,' she said.

A scowl spread over his face. 'This was deliberate. *They* sent you here.

Those little devils, the putti:

`The cherubs?'

`The living cannot see me, except by decree. That's why I hid here. So they sent something I couldn't ignore.A lost soul. One of my charges.'

Ònly the dead see angels,' repeated Peri.

Yy swung back and forth on his hands. 'You should be winging up the tunnel. But they sent you to me instead. They needed you to get at me.

That's why they killed you!'

Peri had no words to speak. Had she died just for this? As if in answer to her silence, there was a chuckling noise from outside.The angel gave a gasp of fright and buried his face in his knees. 'I don't exist! Make them go away!'

Edging to the lip of the cage's bent roof, Peri squinted out.

Across the floor, as far as she could see, hundreds of pairs of sapphire eyes catching the glimmer from her angel. A sea of cherubs. The whole flock had gathered. All staring at her.

Oh, God. What did they want? She was a ghost. What could she do, other than hug her fallen angel and mouth meaningless soothing noises? She pulled back inside the cage.

`Trapped; moaned Yy. He stared up at the accusing painted angels flocked on his metal roof. Then he rounded on Peri. 'You've no business here. Go away. Leave me alone!'

That did it. Things she'd always wanted to say to the Doctor came tumbling out. 'You shut up! Always criticising and complaining. You're so self-obsessed. Just think about other people for once!'

Ì don't exist.'

She pointed outside. *They* seem to think so:

`They hurt you. They *killed* you. It's all my fault!'

little baby faces were gazing in under the lip of the roof. Pert ignored the audience. 'Maybe it is. But you're still Yy. Still an angel. You could still do something!'

`Too late'

`So why am *I* here?' Out of her coat she produced the golden feather. It gleamed with its own radiance. This is yours, isn't it?'

Yy gazed at the feather. 'I stole back just one. And then lost that too.

Theft is another sin!

`Not theft,' said Peri. 'It isn't lost. And you could still finish your job: He slowly reached for the feather. But he saw his stained figures stretching out and snatched back his hand. Ì'm tainted. Defiled by longing'

Peri grabbed his shoulders, ignoring his squeals of pain. 'I'm praying to you,Yy. Are you listening? Please, please finish your work. Do it. Because I believe in you:

The angel Yy gave a low sigh and clutched her arm. 'Endless prayers I hear. Endless. But I never had the chance before to answer one'

`Thank you,' she said quietly. 'Is there a way out?'

Yy eyed the watching cherubic faces:The world taught me to lie too.

There is a way out, but you'll have to help me. My legs are weak'

The cherubs clustered close as Peri struggled under the lip, supporting Yy on her shoulder. She had to push at them to force through.

ghat way,' said Yy pointing between the cages, and they edged a slow path, lit by his radiance, wading between the staring putti. Step by step.A chuckle here. An answer ahead of them The sudden flutter of wings.

Hundreds of cold little eyes.At any moment the whole flock might rise up **and** shred them.

`Thought they were meant to be friendly; whispered Peri.

`Mischievous; replied Yy. `They have a job to do'

Peri yelped as a cherub pinched viciously at her leg.

Òther way, other way!' hissed Yy.

She turned and the shape of her discarded body lay ahead surrounded

by putti. She faltered. 'I don't want to see. Not again'There was a barrage of pinches. No! Just leave it. Make sure it has a decent funeral' The putti pinched her again and she lashed out with her free arm. No!'

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`Get in,' said Yy gently

`What?'

`You've played your part. I'm out. Now get back in'

Before she could stop herself, Peri found herself sinking, sliding back into the warmth of her own shape. Her body fitting snugly around her.

Good to be back home, very much alive.

She sat up and coughed. She smelt the world again. Its dust in her throat. She felt mucky and used.And the putti still surrounded her

`Not finished yet,' declared the angel Yy.`Now I need your physical help.

She sighed and started gathering the spilled contents of her bag, amazed that she seemed to have no injuries at all. But I can see you'

`Dead or alive again, you'll never lose that second sight'

She caught him as he fell, took his weight and walked him through the waiting cherubs to the handleless door. This time it slid open easily. Up the stairs they went into the dazzling living light of Heaven's suburbs.

They paused beside the TARDIS (no sign of the Doctor).

Yy's hand went to his head.`Twenty-three people stuck in a long queue here on Sheol are praying that their new guide will shut up and the tour will end'

Peri smiled. The Doctor was still busy.

Yy pointed her towards the Elysian Fields. The Gates are that way.' And he leaned on her as they set off across the brown turf.

`Have you still got your speech?' asked Peri. She watched the pink cloud of putti turn sharply in the palace-filled sky above them.

`Too late for that,' he answered. "That moment's passed'

`But... ' she stuttered.

`But I can still complete my other task? He sounded certain, but his weight was getting too much for her.

`What other task?'

`Close the door: He saw her look of bewilderment. Old Heaven is gone.

I'm the last one out:

Às long as you don't turn the lights out too: She hefted his growing weight.

In the distance, she saw two huge stone pillars standing alone on the park, clear of any wall or building. And between the edifice and themselves stretched a long, long winding queue of pilgrims in wheelchairs. A dulcet announcement blared over speakers. Sir John Gielgud *again: `Waiting time to the Gates is currently seven hours. Please have your tickets for the holy shrine ready'*

Peri groaned. Sorry. I don't think I can carry you much further.'And she dropped him

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The putti wheeled above.

Yy pointed at a booth hiring out wheelchairs. He produced some coins.

`Change from the flesh,' he mumbled embarrassedly.

Peri collected a chair from the nurse in charge. 'Who is this for?' asked the woman, oblivious of the angel already sitting comfortably under the woollen rug.

`No time,' called Peri and started to run, skirting the sides of the queuing area. Ensconced in his seat, Yy began to laugh as the queuers turned to stare. The chair moved easily. Guards began to shout. And as she ran, Peri heard her own name being called. She could see an arm waving from the middle of the queue, above the curly yellow hair of the Doctor.About four hours from the front, she reckoned.

No time to stop.

Peri and an angel in a wheelchair. On and round towards the front and the looming Gates. A huge grinning rubber cherub waddled into their path, but they sent it flying to the ground. Several stewards, dressed as hermits, were closing in, but a sudden swoop of cherubs, fluttering and pinching, threw them into total disarray.

Putti were swooping in everywhere, sending the stewards and queuers reeling in panic, clearing the path for Peri.

`The Gates of Old Heaven,' shouted Yy. Between the crumbling pillars of the shrine stood two immense doors, their hard surfaces throwing back the pearly light in all colours of the rainbow. One door was closed, the other was ajar and a red rope cordoned off the path for the queuing tourists to pass through to the other side.The edge of the door was worn smooth by the hands of countless pilgrims.

Yy braced himself:Straight through,' he called.

Peri gave one final burst of speed, mowing down the cordon, and steering straight through the gap.

The park on the other side was just as full of chaos. No choir of angels to greet them, just putti dive-bombing anyone who came near.

Yy stumbled out of his wheelchair and set his hands to the huge door.

He began to push and Peri pushed with him Slowly the door inched forward.And slowly the coloured stains on Yy's splayed fingers faded and dissolved until his hands were cleansed and pure, radiant like the rest of his body. But the scars on his back stayed crimson.

With a mighty clang, the door heaved into place.Yy opened a tiny door set in the pearl facia and turned the small black key inside, and the Gates of Old Heaven were shut.

Peri hugged him hard. 'Now what?' she said trying to regain her breath, a little disappointed at the lack of fireworks or seraphic rapture.

Ìt's just a closure,' said Yy:Somebody had to do it'

`Yeah I guess that was important' She looked at the chaos around them.

The crowds had withdrawn, but the cherubs were still swooping low.

`Where will you go now? Back to Heaven?'

`The *New* Heaven,' he reminded her. Ì have to search for it. Just like the rest of you'

`There are still good things out here: she said:Plenty of good people.'

He half smiled. But I can no longer fly' He looked up at a little group of putti who were chuckling in the air above him. They suddenly swooped and lifted him gently off the ground. 'What's this?' He started to laugh. Am I forgiven after all? Are we going home?'

The putti joined with his laughter.

`Wait: shouted Peri and they circled back. 'Yy, tell me one thing'

Àsk: he called down.

`Have you seen Him?'

'Him?'

`Yes. You're from Heaven.You must have seen Him:

The angel's face clouded with incomprehension. 'Heaven's a big organisation, Peri. No one actually *sees* Him' He said it as if it was obvious.

`So how do you know He exists?'

Yy was silent for a moment.The putti giggled. Then they fluttered their burden in close.

Ìt's all a matter of belief,' he asserted:If we knew everything, there'd be no faith:And he leaned forward his exquisitely handsome features, so very un-Hollywood.May I?' he asked.

Sure: she said, and he kissed her on the lips. 'God in Heaven: she whispered.

'Peri?' said a million voices above her. For suddenly the sky was filled from end to end with a heavenly host, all leaning forward, all puckered up, to kiss, embrace or smother her with their iridescent

beating wings.

`Stop it!' shouted Yy. `That's enough! You've got work to do!'

And the veil fell again and she was alone beside an empty wheelchair in the empty park. She watched a little light rising up into the firmament beyond the clouds and palaces.

`Peri?'The Doctor came puffing round the side of the pillars. He swatted at a couple of tiny pink flies that buzzed round his head like miniature putti. This *Heaven* certainly isn't everything it's cracked up to be. I'm not sure what's been going on, but I think we should move before that tour catches up with us: He eyed the wheelchair:And what did you bring this thing for? I'm not in my dotage yet!'

So there are things you don't know, she thought, greatly comforted.

His eyes narrowed. 'What have you been up to?'

`Not telling; she said, but she reached into her bag and pulled out the little box containing the broken fob watch. Ì was hoping to get this fixed.

Sorry:

He frowned and swatted at another fly. When he opened the box, the watch inside was complete. Mended and ticking again, as if its own personal time had been wound back a week. He beamed with astonishment. 'Thank you, Peri.This must have cost an arm and a leg: Peri just stared in disbelief. `Nearly my life,' she heard herself say.

Ì picked something up for you too,' he added. 'In the market' Out of a pocket, he produced a shining coppery disc. 'It's a halo' He fixed it in the air over her head where it hovered, humming a little. 'Saint Perpugilliam the endlessly patient'

She began to grin. 'It's awful. Wonderfully tacky.'

`Yes, it most certainly is' He nudged her. Ì thought you'd like it'

She looked up into the sky again. The little light had twinkled into the high firmament and was lost amongst all the other stars.

SECTION 04

SOLITUDE

Rebecca Levene

The day started, as every day started, with the sensation of cold. Jen imagined that it was the icy nothingness of space, seeping in through the walls, creeping down the darkened corridors and airways, under the doorway of her room, and snuggling into bed with her until she woke up, every morning, with a start of fear. It's over, she thought, as she always thought. The vacuum's been breached and soon I'll die.

It wasn't such a fanciful notion. The station's equipment had deteriorated steadily over the last five years. Jen had tried to fix it, had even succeeded in some places, cobbling together contraptions of wire **and** circuit that got the job done, though never well. But it was a losing battle. The station, which had once been home to twelve fully trained officers of the Zara Seven Colonial Army, now housed only one woman: Jen Yates - Troop Entertainer, Third Class.

She rolled out of bed, blinked sleep from her eyes, and staggered through into the central control room. There had been a time when she was careful to shower and wash every morning. That time was long past.

Carl spun to face her when she entered the room, his feet clanging on the metal floor. His huge, blind head tipped to one sid, trying to bring his good ear closer to the source of the noise. Satisfied that it was her by something, some long-ago memorised pattern in her breathing or footsteps, he raised a hand in a casual half-wave of greeting. It was a curiously human gesture from the old machine, and she wondered if in all the time they had spent together they had somehow rubbed off on each other. If, over the years, Carl had become a little more human - and she a little less.

`How's it looking? You managed to fix that external server?' she asked.

`There was insufficient energy in the fuel cells to negotiate a successful reboot'

`Well, can we recharge them?'

Carl shook his head, a gesture, she thought, of frustration rather than negation. 'Impossible for me to say. I was unable to read the output: His eyes glowed momentarily dull red, but she knew it was just a ghost signal.

They were damaged beyond repair, unable to transmit even the heat-sensor data which had once enabled him to move without difficulty in

pitch darkness.

She sighed. 'Fine. I'll go out myself later?

She approached the main console and slumped into a chair. Carl 187

remained silent. A *reproachful* silence, she thought, but he didn't say anything, didn't point out that with her 'later' usually meant `never'. After a second, Carl's heavy, exoskeletal arm groped for the wall, and he guided himself round to the door.

I will return to hydroponics; Carl said.

`Yeah. I'm gonna...' She waved her arm vaguely at the screen. Carl couldn't see the gesture, but he knew what she meant. She heard his heavy tread retreat down the corridor as she flicked on the screen in front of her, then leaned forward, towards the micro-cam, and smiled, her body suddenly alive with an energy it lacked the rest of the dull day.

`Hello, sweetheart,' she said into the camera. 'I dreamed about you last night. I dreamed the war was over, and I could finally allow you to be born. We were running through the meadow behind the house where I used to live. It's funny, after all these years up here, I find that the memory of grass is fading, greying out to the colour of these walls. But in the dream I could smell that exact fresh-cut scent that speaks of summer to the animal part of our brains: She paused a moment, then sighed:I wish it was possible. I believe it will be soon. I just... It's been so long, so many years since I heard anything, and I'm beginning to think... I'm beginning to wonder... Can they really all be dead?'

And then the Klaxon sounded. The Klaxon that had remained silent so long that for a moment she forgot what it signified, and jumped up, panicked, knocking her chair backwards, wondering what had gone wrong this time -

Then she realised what it was, and her heart leapt with such a painful thump she felt its impact against her ribcage. It was the proximity Klaxon .

Something was approaching. A ship. There was a ship approaching the station. Her thoughts were like jagged fragments that couldn't be glued together to make anything useful. With a great effort, she focused.A ship was approaching the station.Very soon it would be docking.And on board there would be people, the first new people she had seen in over five years.

Only as she hurriedly pulled on her evac suit in the airlock did it occur to her that the ship might not be a human vessel. It could be the enemy -

the Reptiles. She thought about going back for a gun, then realised that there was one already at her waist, a long-ignored part of the uniform she pulled on every morning. Of course, there was little she could do against a shipful of Reps. But she could at least die fighting. If the Earth Reptiles really were here, if her side really had lost the war, then there was nothing to do *but* die. Die - and take the world with her, as the deadman's switch wired to her heart heard a fatal stillness, and finally let go.

And the weapon of last resort, which she had given up five years of her 188

life to guard, would be released. In the brief minutes that the Reptiles had to contemplate their utter destruction, they would know their victory over the human colonists had been a hollow one.

Jen found a bleak comfort in this. She clutched the rifle tighter in her hand as the airlock doors hissed open. Outside, the beam of her helmet light cut a swathe through the darkness, but it illuminated... nothing.The ship should have been visible by now, its engine roar deafening even through the muffle of her suit. Instead, silence. She stepped forward, hesitantly at first, then more confidently as she began to think that it must have been an instrument error.A ghost reading. After all this time, longing for some company other than Carl's, she was surprised to find herself relieved.

Then she saw it, a blue flicker caught for a moment in the beam of light, then lost again in darkness. She hurriedly swivelled back round, thinking she must have imagined it, but there it was. A big blue box, sitting incongruously on the moon's surface, only a few hundred yards from the station entrance. She stared at it, dumbstruck.

She was still rooted to the spot when the door opened and three figures stepped out. She stumbled backwards in shock, raised the gun, almost fired Then lowered it, just a fraction, as she realised that the figures were human.The first to emerge had been a man, somewhere in his forties, she guessed, and after him two women. One of the women smiled at her through the clear helmet of her suit. The other stared, expressionless.

`What a lovely surprise to find you here: said the man.

Jen opened her mouth to reply, then realised she didn't know what to say.

The man pointed at the entrance behind her. 'Aren't you going to invite us in?'

`What?' she said, numbly.

Ìnto the station,' the man said patiently.

He smiled at her but she just stared. Finally, she opened her mouth to ask the one question that her beleaguered mind could process. The war.

Is it over?'

The man frowned:Oh yes. Yes, well and truly finished, I'd say.'

And... we won?'

The woman who had been smiling at her earlier, looked puzzled.

`We...?'

The man shot the woman a stem look, and her smile switched back on, looking a lot less genuine:Yes, we definitely won. Hooray for us!'

Jen lowered her gun uncertainly is that... Can it really be true?'

The man walked briskly past her and to the station entrance. 'Why would we be here if it wasn't?'

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Jen served the visitors a meal in the hydroponics plant. She felt a little ashamed at the paucity of the provisions but the man - who told her he was a doctor - didn't seem to mind. He tucked into the shrivelled apples and soy-meal pasties with relish. The smiling woman, Bernice, picked at the food without either enthusiasm or complaint.Ace, the last of the party, ate nothing, pacing the perimeter of the group like a caged animal.

`Technology's moved on, you see, the doctor was saying now,`since your day. Not as primitive as - ' he waved grandly around the station - 'all this'

Ìs that how we won, then?' Jen asked. Ì guess it makes sense. The Reps always were stuck in the past - literally' She laughed, a little, but no one else joined in.

`That's right,' Bernice said eventually. `Those ultra-high-powered plasma taser lasers really put paid to those scaly bastards:

Jen looked at her uncertainly, not sure if she was joking.

`What I want to know is what you're doing here,' Ace said, narrowed eyes boring into Jen. Her voice was softer than her face, but not by much.

Jen found herself unconsciously leaning back from that hostile gaze.

`Surely it says in the records, planetside?'

The doctor jumped up, hands grasping the air in excitement. 'But so much was lost, you see, in the war. So many things we don't know. That's why we came. To find. To understand' He rolled the last word on his tongue, relishing it.

Jen sighed, finding his excitement, their very presence, wearying after so many years alone. Ì don't know that I'm the right person to help: she said. Ì'm just a singer. I was out here, giving a show, and then the war started, and they put me in a uniform and told me I was part of the army now I didn't know anything except how to sing, and I doubt I could even do that any more'

Bernice looked at her, considering. 'But I don't understand why you're all alone up here. I don't see why they'd leave a... a singer, in charge of all this'

`Because - '

`Who is this? Are there intruders, who is here?' Carl's voice boomed out hugely in the vast chamber. He stumbled towards them, tripping over a girder in his panicked haste but pushing himself forward again. 'Jen, are you in need of my assistance?' His head swung, impotently unseeing, from side to side. 'Intruders - identify yourselves!'

He flailed his massive arms, catching one of the chairs and sending it spinning across the room. Bernice ducked under the table with a small cry of alarm.Then bobbed her head back up just long enough to grab the doctor and pull him down with her - milliseconds before Carl's arm would have connected with his head. Ace ducked behind the

table, then pulled out a sleek black gun and sighted along its barrel.

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Panicked, Jen flung herself in front of Carl, whether to stop him or protect him she wasn't quite sure. She grabbed hold of one of his arms.

The arm instantly jetted upwards, lifting her off the floor, then shook violently so that she heard the whiplash crack of her spine and couldn't control a cry of fear. 'Carl! Carl! It's me!' His hand closed cold around her throat, leaving her able to do little more than croak. 'Carl, please, don't...'

After an agonising second, the pressure of his hand released and he set her back down gently on the ground. She staggered, barely able to keep her feet.

Jen... Jen... Have I hurt you? Have these others hurt you?'

`No; Jen grated through her bruised throat. 'It doesn't matter. Carl, these are friends.The war's over.' As she said it, the power of these words struck her fully for the first time:The war's over; she repeated, lost in wonder.

Later still, she found the doctor, sitting in the almost-dark of the docking bay, Carl crouched down beside him like a dog at his master's knee.

`Doctor...?'

`Yes, indeed'

`What are you doing?'

'I thought I'd make myself useful.Try to repair Carl's vision:As he spoke, the doctor dug a spanner-like implement into Carl's head-casing and a shower of sparks shot out. He leapt back in alarm, tripping over his own feet and landing on his backside wearing a comically surprised expression.

Resisting the urge to laugh, Jen held out a hand and hauled him upright.

Àre you sure you know what you're doing?'

Òh yes, yes. I could do this with my eyes shut. In fact, I often have'

`Well then it's very kind of you,' Jen said, uncertainly.

`Kind?' the doctor said, puzzled. 'Carl's blindness must be terribly upsetting for him. If I can help...'

Jen blinked. She had seldom seen Carl's blindness as a problem for him, more an inconvenience for her. 'He's learnt to cope with it,' she said.

The doctor stared at her for a second, and she was struck by the extreme brightness of his eyes. 'People learn to cope with a lot of unpleasant things, I've found. But sometimes the coping itself is the problem: Jen felt very strongly that he was trying to tell her something, but she couldn't for the life of her work out what. Suddenly unable to hold his gaze, she looked up at the broken gantry above.

`There's lots else here needs repairing, if you're in the mood; she said, attempting a joke.

`Heavy engineering isn't my speciality; the doctor said.

Jen shrugged. 'There's no point, anyway, is there? If the war's over we can dismantle this place, leave it to rot'

The doctor gazed at her seriously. 'But where will you go if we do that?'

`Planetside: Jen stuttered, shocked, 'I thought that went without... I mean, I've been here five years - I've got to go home.

The doctor's eyes were as cold as ice. 'And what if you can't go home?'

Jen was on her feet and running before she'd even fully registered his words.

She had hoped to shelter in the privacy of her quarters, away from the stranger and his terrifying eyes. But when she slapped open the door release and staggered in, it was to find Bernice crouched over her safe box, staring at the contents in fascination. With a cry of rage, Jen pulled her away, throwing her back against the wall.

`Get away from there!' she shouted, her voice a hoarse shriek from Carl's earlier attack.

Bernice looked up at her in alarm, seemed about to say something, then thought better of it and simply stood, brushing dust from her clothes:I'm sorry,' she said. 'I know I shouldn't be snooping around your room, but I couldn't resist.

Her shamelessness deflated Jen's rage. 'You've got no right...' she said, more quietly

Ì know,' Bernice said. She made to leave, but at the door swivelled to face Jen again. 'But now I'm here, you have to tell me why you're keeping an embryo in your cool box'

Jen felt all her muscles tense in anger. 'She's not an embryo!' she said, furious.

Bernice peered back down into the box. Really? Looks exactly like one to me. Third trimester, by the look of her.' She turned to Jen, smiling slightly. Almost a baby, I'd say, or is that what you meant?'

Jen relaxed, just a fraction. 'She's my daughter,' she said.

`Really?' Bernice said, astonished.

Jen bristled. 'Why do you find that hard to believe?'

`Well, for a start - ' Bernice began, and then Jen had the impression that she changed her mind about what she was going to say.I suppose I'm just wondering why you're keeping her frozen in a box in your bedroom'

`How could I let her be born while the war was still going on?' *Jen* asked:What kind of mother would I be, if I brought her into that kind of world?'

Bernice looked at her inscrutably. 'No kind of mother at all: she said.

When Jen returned to the screening room, unable to rest in her bedroom, even now Bernice had gone, she found the last of the three: Ace. She was seated by one of the consoles, staring intently at the screen as her fmgers brushed through the VR input-web floating above the console.

`What are you doing?' Jen asked, wearily.

`Nothing,' Ace said, not pausing in her work. Jen felt like she'd been

dismissed. But this was her station, damn it! She'd had it to herself for five long years, kept it going when it seemed that everyone else had forgotten its existence. She felt an acrid burn of long-suppressed anger and indignation in her throat. And now these strangers came and disrupted everything. They asked her questions, questions that sounded like accusations and then told her nothing. How dare they!

Jen realised that she had bared her teeth in a snarl of anger. 'Doesn't look like nothing to me,' she grated.

Ace shrugged. Doesn't it?'

Jen snapped:Answer me, you bitch! What are you doing?'

Ace turned to face her at last. Her expression was entirely untroubled.

Àll right, don't get your knickers in a twist. If you really wanna know, I'm manually disarming the weapons systems.'

`You can't do that!' Jen said, shocked.

`Well, it wasn't easy, but I think I figured out a way'

Her brazenness left Jen floundering. 'No. I meant... You're not allowed to do that. The systems have to remain online at all times'

Ace shook her head, a sharp gesture of annoyance. 'Why? If the war's over, it's safer for the weapon to be disabled:

And that was when, for the first time, it occurred to Jen that the war might *not* be over.

It all made sense when she thought about it, back in the barricaded safety of her room. She had been ready to believe everything they said when they arrived, *desperate* to believe them. Of course she had.

And they had used that. They had told her exactly what she wanted to hear. But they had taken their cues from her. They had volunteered nothing. They hadn't said anything about conditions back home, about how the war had been won, or at what cost.They hadn't told her why she had lost all communication with the planet five years ago. The doctor hadn't even told her his name.

But if they weren't what they said they were, what were they? The answer was obvious.They were the worst sort of traitors, traitors to their own species, in league with the Reps. The war must still be

raging, far down on the planet's surface. Maybe the Reps were losing, and this was a last desperate attempt to co-opt the ultimate weapon for themselves. Or maybe the humans were near defeat, and the Reps - knowing of the weapon's lethal capability - had come to disable it.

Yes, of course, that must be it. It would explain why the doctor, Ace and Bernice had decided to commit this ultimate treachery. Seeing death as inevitable, they had made a terrible deal to preserve their own lives.

It was obvious what Jen had to do.

She activated her room's comms unit, patched in the code for Carl, chose mode-private and waited for him to signal that he was listening .

After a moment, though, it was her screen that crackled into life. On it, Carl's skeletal face stared at her.

Stared.

It took a moment for that to register. Carl's eyes were no longer a dull, unseeing red. They glowed with life and, some instinctive part of her suddenly knew, with hostility

`Carl... ' she said, uncertainly

Who are you?' said Carl.

Jen felt her pulse race, and fear sharpened her senses, so that her nose was suddenly assaulted with the musty odour of a room too long uncleaned.

`What do you mean, "Who am I"?' she said, her voice quavering despite her best efforts to control it.

`What have you done to Jen?' Carl roared, and then his great metal fist smashed into the screen and there was nothing but dar kness.

Her one ally was lost, in league now with the enemy. If only she had realised what the doctor was doing, when he 'helped' Carl with his vision... But such thoughts were pointless - what was done was done.

Perhaps her race was gone. Perhaps, as she had long feared, she was already the last human survivor of her planet. It didn't matter. Her

duty was clear. She would kill the intruders. And then, if she could find a way to repair Ace's sabotage, she would unleash the weapon.

Jen gasped with relief as she finally reached her destination, the central power unit. The door was closed, and she raised her gun, fingers whitening on the barrel to stop its shaking.After a second's hesitation, she pressed the door release, then leaped into the room, ready to no one.The place was deserted.

At first she thought it was a trap. But no, the room was truly empty, and when she coded-shut the door behind her she felt safe for the first time since she had realised the truth of her situation. The intruders had been foolish to leave this place deserted. They must have underestimated her, assumed her will had been broken by their subversion of Carl. She felt a momentary warm glow of pride.

But there was no time for that. She had a purpose now She must not be distracted.

Twenty sweaty minutes later she had completed her task and - with the final flip of a switch - the station was plunged into darkness. Now everyone was as blind as Carl had once been. She snapped on the night-194

vision goggles she had liberated from stores. Except her, of course.

Navigating through the negative-green world of the goggles, she jogged out of the central power unit.

She smashed the butt of her gun into the door-release mechanism as she left. Of course, the doctor would probably be able to repair it, but he would need time. She would ensure that he had none.

She made her way quickly through back corridors, places she thought the traitors would not know. Her pace picked up as she became used to the goggles, though she couldn't quite adjust to the strange glow they cast over the world, like a haunting.Time and again, she thought she caught a glimpse of one of her lost colleagues, smiling at her from a doorway. But when she turned to face them she realised they were nothing but a mirage, called to mind by the angle of a door or a shadow. She ran on, ignoring these shades as best she could, not wanting now, of all times, to think of all she had lost.

Her pace slowed as she neared the hydroponics plant. Cautiously, she stepped through the door, then paused to survey the chamber. This had always been Carl's favourite place. Perhaps, in his blindness, he

had enjoyed its soft sounds, the drips and whispers of leaf against leaf. She heard those whispers now, but in her mind they were the voices of her colleagues, calling to her from the darkness, asking her why they had died.

She shook her head, banishing these morbid imaginings with a conscious effort.

She could see little more than ten feet ahead of her, and the heat the plants gave out would mask any more distant human imprints. She must be careful here.

Holding her gun at the ready, she edge forward to the nearest tree, then peered carefully round its thick trunk. There was nothing, just the dull glow of the surrounding vegetation, the small sparks of birds and insects and - there! A flicker of something bigger, brighter.

A moment later it had disappeared, lost in the surrounding glow, but Jen was sure of what she'd seen. It was one of the intruders.

She inched forward, finger hovering over the trigger, moisture from the trees dripping placidly onto her head as her whole body strained with fear. Terrified, edging ever nearer to that flicker of life. Finally, she knew that she was very close. Slowly, painfully slowly, she rolled her body around the tree trunk, feeling the rough texture of the bark against her skull. *(It must be the old* oak, one part of her mind thought idly, *I hadn't realised I'd come so far.) And* there it was again, very clear now.A woman, her long ponytail showing up as a dark stain on her back.Ace.

She was crouched down on one knee, scanning the trees around her and, Jen saw with a stomach-clenching shock, she too was wearing night-vision goggles. Fear paralysed her. But, after a long, cold moment, she 195

realised that Ace wasn't looking in her direction. Now was her opportunity. Shoot or be shot.

Her muscles tight with nervous anticipation, she stepped out from the tree to give herself a clear shot - and a twig snapped loudly beneath her boot.

Without thought, she flung herself back round behind the trunk, pulling her limbs in tight, making herself as small, as invisible, as possible. Her breath rasped in her throat, and she found herself trying to silence it, holding in her last breath until the tightness in her chest

forced her to expel it and suck in another in a desperate gasp. She realised she had left her gun behind, dropped it in her hurry to escape.

From Ace, there was silence. No crackle of twigs as *she* moved. Ace was a soldier. She wouldn't give her enemies any warning.

Jen held herself perfectly still, expecting death at any moment. She found that was almost glad now it was over, now that the end approached.

And then Ace stepped forward.

And she wasn't looking at Jen. She didn't realise Jen was therejen knew she would not get this chance again. With a sudden surge of adrenaline, she leapt forward, flinging her arms round the woman and pushing her down to the ground.

Even with the advantage of surprise, and superior bulk, Jen was in danger of losing the fight. Ace bucked against her managed to get one of her arms free - fortunately not her gun band - and reached back to grasp at Jen's face, her fingers digging agonisingly beneath her goggles and into her eyes. Desperate, Jen smacked her head down, into Ace's head Ace's body suddenly lost resistance, disoriented by the blow.

Jen used the opportunity to wrench the gun from Ace's arms, flipping the woman onto her back. Ace's eyes blinked open, clear consciousness showing in them again, and she reached up with an iron grip to push Jen's arms away from her. But it was too latejen was already holding the barrel of Ace's own gun against her head:Let go or I'll shoot; Jen gasped.

Ace's grip on her arm didn't weaken.

Ì mean it, you bitch!' Jen shouted, her finger tightening on the trigger.

One more second and she *would* kill Ace, she could feel her body tightening in anticipation.

Ace could clearly feel it to, because she let her bands fall from Jen's arms, though her body remained as taught as a stretched wire, ready for action.

`Where are you friends?' Jen asked `Where are the other traitors?'

Ace said nothing. Jen realised that the other woman didn't fear her at

all. Enraged, Jen pushed the barrel of the gun so deeply into Ace's face that it drew blood `Tell me!' she screamed.

Ace smiled humourlessly. 'They're behind you; she said - and Jen felt
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herself grasped with an inhuman strength, lifted clean away from Ace, metal fingers closing round her throat so that the gun dropped from her nerveless fingers.

She couldn't even turn to see Carl. Couldn't see her only remaining friend, who would, in a few short moments, be ending her life, squeezing it relentlessly out of her.All she could watch was Ace, calmly getting to her feet, searching the ground till she found her gun, then lifting it and pointing it straight at Jen.

`Please ' Jen gasped.

She shut her eyes as Ace fired, and when she felt a sudden cessation of pain she thought for a moment that this was death. But then she felt the shock of an impact, her goggles smashing and falling from her face, and she understood that she had been dropped. That Carl had released her.

She opened her eyes in time to see Carl topple to the ground, one eye's glow already fading, the other nothing but a jagged hole.

Ì wish you hadn't done that: the doctor's voice said from behind her.

She turned to see him and Bernice approaching, and realised that the station lights had come back on.

Ace shrugged:It would have killed her.There was no other way'

The doctor shook his head. 'There's always another way, Ace. I thought I'd taught you that. Now: he said, turning to Jen, Ì think this dream has gone on long enough. It's time for you to wake up:

And Jen saw, with an icy flush of horror, that the doctor was holding her child, her baby girl, high above his head. The bright lights reflected from the glass of the casing, but she could still see her child's form floating helplessly inside.

`You bastard! Put her down!' She leapt forward instinctively, but was stopped by Ace's arm round her throat, her gun against her temple.

`Don't even think about it, Ace said.

`Come on, the doctor taunted:Don't just stand there:

Again, she made to move forward, and again Ace held her back. She struggled ferociously in Ace's arms, but to no avail.

`What kind of mother are you?' the doctor asked:Are you going to let your baby die? Are you going to watch while I kill her just because you're too afraid to use the one weapon you've got?'

Jen opened her mouth to ask what weapon, to beg him to stop tormenting her, but some part of her knew, some part of her remembered that there was something... Something she could once do...

`Do it!' the doctor shouted. 'Remember! Remember what you are!'

Without conscious thought, Jen's third eye opened and trained its power on the doctor. He cried out in pain and doubled over, clutching her baby to his chest.

Then, terrified, Jen turned and ran.

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It was a blur, running through the station, locking herself in the control room, looking in the mirrored surface of the screen and seeing, really seeing, her own features for the first time in five years. Seeing the scaly green skin, the third eye, closed again now, the reptilian face staring back at her.

And she remembered.

Jen, whose real name, the name given to her by her clutch mother, was Qurra, remembered it all.

She remembered training as a recruit in the Earth Reptile Militia, so proud to have been taken on so young... She remembered watching the early skirmishes with the human settlers on the communal vid screens, feeling anger and pride, knowing that if it came to a fight, she was ready...

Her first battle, the loudness of it, the fear... Her first kill, a young human male who had attempted to infiltrate her unit's headquarters, the knowledge that she had snuffed out a life, sickening and

exhilarating in equal measures...

And her first visit here, in a stolen human orbital vehicle, so proud that she had found a way into this place, this place which had always been so impossible to penetrate, whose existence had always prevented her people from taking decisive action to win the war...

Knowing that this chance might not come again, that she would not be able to call for back-up without exposing herself... Landing on the station's surface, pretending to be a human pilot in distress. Killing the crew member sent to welcome her. Killing the rest, hunting them down one by one before they knew what was happening.The triumph, that she had done this, that with this one act she had won the war single-handedly...

But not realising... Not realising until it was too late that there was one person, one more person than she had known of, a woman who had not been listed in the station logs she had so carefully accessed and analysed.

An entertainer, sent to boost the morale of this most important Earth force. Jen Yates.

And not realising that Jen Yates, terrified, unable to understand that this was a lone attack, thinking the human race had lost the war, would do the unthinkable, would race to the control centre, mere seconds ahead of Qurra - and, even with the life draining out of her as Qurra's mind lashed into hers, would release the weapon of last resort.

Qurra remembered trying to warn her people, but the signal could travel no faster than the weapon, would only arrive when there was no one left alive to hear it.

Knowing it was pointless, she had searched the station logs for some way to stop the weapon. But she had found nothing. Only this diary, the diary Jen Yates had left for her daughter, speaking of her hopes for their 198

future. A future that now would never come, not for any single life form on the planet. Not for the humans, not for Qurra's sister and brothers, her friends. She had killed the future.

And as the backwash of that death washed over the station, she remembered how her mind had cracked. How, knowing that it was unbearable to live a second longer as Qurra, the genocide, she had chosen to become someone else.

She supposed she must have removed the corpses, cleaned up the station. At some point she must have disabled any instrument that might identify her as an intruder. She certainly must have blinded Carl so that, for five dark years, he had lived happily with the enemy.

And then she had sat at this console, and recorded the next message for her daughter.

Now, Qurra sat once again, and recorded a final message, a message of farewell and apology. And then she walked out of the station airlock, and this time she did not wear a suit.

On a planet many light years away, a husband and wife gazed in wonder at the man who had answered all their prayers.The wife still clutched her new, yet-to-be-born child tightly in her arms.

Tut where is she from?' asked the husband, finally, though he did not want to hear the answer, did not want to know that there might be some reason why he and his wife should not accept this gift.

`She's an orphan; she has no one else to care for her,' the stranger told him, and he saw one of the stranger's female companions wince as if in remembered pain.

`What do you want in return?' the wife asked, always more suspicious than her husband.

`Nothing: the stranger said. He placed a micro-tape on the table. 'But when she's old enough, I'd like you to play her this. It's a message from...

You can tell her it's from her mother.'

His female companion shifted, looked as if she might speak, reconsidered, then spoke anyway. Tut why?' she asked the stranger. 'What does anyone gain from remembering such terrible things?'

The stranger leaned forward, intense:The most important thing of all -

life.A chance to mine the past and turn it into something better.A future.

He paused a moment, then sat back, calm again. 'Do you know who this child will grow up to be?'

His companion's eyes widened, as if in sudden revelation, then

narrowed with what might have been suspicion or anger, or perhaps both. 'No, I don't,' she said coldly.

The stranger smiled at her. 'Neither do I. Isn't that wonderful?'

0, Darkness

John Binns

Adric's reserves of patience, never very plentiful at the best of times, had started to be exhausted from the moment the TARDIS had first arrived in the labyrinthine tower they'd learned to call the Structure; nine days into their stay, therefore, they were nothing but a dim memory. He couldn't remember the last time he'd been so bored, so frustrated at the tedium of his humdrum day-to-day existence, so maddened by the cloying omnipresence of such a dismal, depressing environment. By now he'd even given up badgering the Doctor and Romana on the subject of when they could leave, tired of being endlessly fobbed-off with non-answers and platitudes, and so he didn't even have the comfort of perceiving an end in sight. In the worst moments, he gloomily wondered at whether a pair of Time Lords would think twice about staying in one place for months, even years: no more than a blink of an eye to them, perhaps, relative to a life span of centuries.

It didn't help, of course, that their existence in the Structure was so uncomfortably reminiscent of Adric's former life aboard the Starliner.

having to walk the same corridors again and again, helping out with mind-numbingly boring tasks of routine maintenance and repair. Like the shutting of the ship during Mistfall, the so-called lockdown' of the Structure meant that for the time being, they had to treat it effectively as their home.

But at least the Starliner had had some concessions to the comfort of its crew, like proper heat and lighting. 111e Structure was dank and dirty, and parts of it looked as if their makers hadn't even considered the presence of people at all. There were whole rooms with ceilings less than five feet above the floor, and connecting walkways so oddly shaped that they could only be traversed with an awkward sideways, tip-toed shuffle.

There were parts of the Structure - seemingly at random, but mostly on the higher floors - whose design was spacious and impressive, and

Adric had noted that these were the rooms made chiefly of steel and aluminium. Other parts, presumably older, seemed constructed out of brick, stone, wood, and even clay, as if the whole tower had been constructed and rebuilt piecemeal over generations or centuries. The newer rooms at least provided some respite from the fetid, dank atmosphere of the older sections, but they still had an awful enclosed, shut-off feel about them, with nothing to connect them with the outside world. Worst of all - and this applied equally to the older and newer sections of the tower - was the darkness, which pervaded everything.

There were no windows to let in natural light; in fact, Adric doubted whether he'd even been in a room that possessed an outside wall. And of the small bulbs that served to illuminate those rooms where they were deemed necessary, it seemed that two out of every three were permanently out of action. The result was an oppressive, permanent twilight, and it was one more reason for Adric to want to leave as a matter of urgency.

Maddeningly, meanwhile, Adric knew that there was a way out - for him, the Doctor and Romana at least, if only they'd deign to use it -

standing embedded in the clay wall of the observations room. (Why it was called that was a mystery to Adric: there were no windows through which to observe anything.) The TARDIS had been Adric's escape from the prison of the Starliner not so long ago, and he had half a mind to creep inside it again one night and make an effort at dematerialising it himself.

He had resolved not to consider doing such a thing for some time, however, considering it a fall-back position for use if and when the Doctor and Roman's determination to stay went on beyond the bounds of reason. But on several occasions, with increasing frequency as the days and nights had worn on,Adric had retreated to the TARDIS purely to bask in its bright white lights.

The rationale for the lockdown had seemed flawed to Adric when first explained to him by the systems administrator, a lank, glum figure with greying hair who insisted on wearing a jet-black visor at all times, and on referring to himself as J. When he'd described the situation on the outside of the Structure, with the encroachment of alien creatures into the fenced-off areas of his precious gardens, he had not made it sound like anything that should prevent their

venturing outdoors.Adric had not been impressed by the system J had developed of combating the Encroachment by means of a remote-controlled roving machine. The creatures, whatever they were, were surely not so fearsome as that, he thought, and certainly not to the sort of travellers in space and time who thought nothing of despatching Marshmen and Great Vampires. For the first two days,Adric's favoured option had been to ignore J's instructions and leave the Structure, with the intention of fighting the creatures in person. Near the end of the second day, he'd been persuaded to don J's operating suit and, through the machine's 'eyes', had seen the Encroachment himself.

The operating suit was quite unpleasant enough by itself, in fact, which was why it had taken two days to persuade Adric to use it; Romana had used it once, on the third day, and had vowed never to do so again. The suit was contained within one of the older, stone-and-clay rooms of the Structure, its opening stretched over the mouth of a man-sized fissure in one of the walls.The fissure was placed, inexplicably, about two feet above 202

the floor, so that it was necessary to clamber on top of a handily placed metal crate before you could manoeuvre your body into it.The process of squeezing into that crevice, surrounded by the tight, clinging plastic of the suit, was horribly uncomfortable. Once inside, with your arms pinned tightly to your sides, you had to manoeuvre your eyes and nose into the opening at the other end quickly, or risk suffocation. Only the relative freedom of movement afforded to your feet gave you any means of escape. It was quite the most undignified and repellent experience Adric could have imagined, and he couldn't fathom why it had been designed with such disregard for the unfortunate user.

Once inside, the system of operating the remote machine was no less arcane or uncomfortable.A holographic display, especially incongruous in the context of the stone-and-clay room, provided a blindingly vivid display of the machine's point of view Swerving your head and shoulders to the left or right would move the machine accordingly, and a nod or pull back would cause the machine to accelerate or slow down. It took some practice: when Adric had first used the suit, he'd manoeuvred the hapless machine halfway across the fenced-off area of the gardens before he'd even worked out what he was doing.The fact that the gardens themselves were overgrown with tall grass and weeds made matters more difficult, as the machine had to navigate all of that before it could even hope to search for the

creatures.

J's description hadn't been terribly helpful to Adric in knowing how to recognise the Encroachment when he saw it: all he'd really had was a general impression that these creatures were numerous and malignant, and that they surrounded and consumed plant life. He hadn't been at all prepared for the fact that they were giants. The first time Adric had glided the machine around a clump of undergrowth and almost bumped into one of the creatures, staring into the rough, scaled skin of its thick hind legs and instinctively pulling the machine backwards, he'd thought the thing was over twenty feet high. Even adjusting for the fact that he'd seen it from a vantage point not far from the ground,Adric reckoned the beast would be above head-height.

If the sharp spines lining its back and the fearsome frill around its porcine face didn't serve to ward off potential predators, a glimpse of its huge thuggish tusks would certainly do the job. Even with the knowledge that any attack would only damage the machine, of which the creature seemed mercifully oblivious, Adric couldn't help but fear it. It took him several minutes to work up the courage to move in for a closer look, which was when it registered that the creature's skin, mottled blue for most of its body, deepened to a jet black towards its feet and the underside of its belly. Bizarrely, there seemed to be smoke coming from the feet, as if the creature's legs were smouldering - a fact that didn't 203

appear to bother it at all, but which apparently threatened the surrounding plants as they sparked and burned in its footsteps.

Once Adric had got his bearings, he wasted no time in following J's instructions and attacking the creature, clenching his teeth around the soft plastic lever that triggered the machine's defence mechanism. The controlled burst of acidic solution, spraying blunderbuss-like in the creature's general direction, seemed ineffectual at first - but after a few moments' determined application, it seemed to have the desired effect as the creature thudded painfully to the ground.

Since that first time, Adric had repeated this procedure three or four times a day, and despatched more than a dozen of the creatures. But it was less than clear just how long this process was meant to take: on J's account, the Encroachment multiplied at an alarming rate, and he could see no sign of the population decreasing in numbers. With each passing day, the unending sameness of their efforts seemed less and

less rewarding, more and more pointless. And meanwhile, for all intents and purposes, they were trapped in this interminable Structure, buried away like frightened moles in the dark.At this stage, dismal as it was,Adric's only hope came from the increasingly fractious behaviour of the Doctor and Romana towards each other, as they bickered and quibbled about what to do and when. Eventually even their exceptional tolerance had its limits, he supposed. In the meantime, it seemed as if the darkness was getting to them all.

The Doctor walked, for what seemed like the fortieth time, down the main corridor that linked the observations room to the systems-management lounge. The curious effect of the walk was that it passed through four distinct sections, in each of which the walls were of a different construction and design. The Doctor's rough estimate, having traversed this route enough times to be thoroughly familiar with it, was that the newer sections were the ones closest to the observations room -

so the route he took had the odd feeling of being a walk back through time as well as through space.

The story of the Structure, pieced together through several very brief conversations with the systems administrator (who wasn't a talkative chap at the best of times), was at least several centuries old. The administrator talked about his ancestors as a generic category as if they had been responsible for the building's construction, but was singularly vague about its purpose - although now, with this so-called Encroachment plaguing the landscape, it served as a useful shelter.Again, it was unclear exactly how long the lockdown had been in place, but the Doctor got the impression that the administrator had been alone in here for some months.

What the Doctor still didn't know was who, if anyone, lived outside: he knew the Structure received messages from someone or something outside it, but for all he knew they could come from different continents, even different planets. The messages were routinely ignored, and replies were almost never sent. Deliberate policies of isolation, the Doctor had mused to Romans days ago, seemed to be terribly popular in E-Space. If he'd been feeling paranoid, he'd say it was all about making their task of getting out of it more difficult. But as Romana had said, paranoia wasn't going to get them out any more quickly. Desperate as it sounded, a few more days' quiet contemplation in this dark, virtually distraction-free prison might be

all they needed for inspiration to strike.

He'd asked the systems administrator to look at the heating this morning, as it really did seem a lot colder than usual. In his usual vague way, he'd said that he might be able to do something about it, and loped off to find the relevant room. It was only hours later that the Doctor had remembered a previous conversation they'd had, about the bizarre system they used for operating the remote probes outside, and had a sudden thought. The more he thought about it, the more determined he was to find the systems administrator and the heating control centre. He quickened his pace.

Ànd just how long did you intend to wait before telling us these were here, fume'

The Doctor knew he was being unfair, in all honesty, as he remonstrated with the hapless systems administrator. It was impossible to tell for sure beneath that darkened visor of his, but he had a horrid feeling the pasty-faced, ill-looking young man might be crying.

Ì'd forgotten; was all J could say in reply, as the Doctor moved more of the thick wooden boards out of the way from the alcove, and snatched at the bulky plastic cassettes that were piled up behind them. His guess, roughly two days ago in fact, had been that J must have a stack of software stashed away somewhere that would help them all operate the remote machine more effectively, possibly without having to use that vile suit.

When he'd suggested it, J had said something dismissive about the old operating systems being put into storage off-site - and so the Doctor had put the thought out of his head. It was only today, quite by accident, as he'd been looking for the set of lost keys that would let him into the heating control centre, that he'd stumbled across the cassettes.The script on them was indecipherable, but the combination of their similarity to the one they'd been using for the operating suit and J's own sheepish expression had tipped him off as to what they were.

`These cassettes could have saved us *days* of work,' the Doctor went on, unable to contain his impatience, ìf we'd had the *slightest* clue they were 205

here: He knelt down by the pile of cassettes, staring back at J with what he sincerely hoped was an angry glare.

Romana, of course, stepped in just then. 'Never mind that now Let's fmd out whether any of it works: Cutting to the chase as usual.

J stepped awkwardly over the discarded planks and, crouching down, took a selection of the cassettes from the pile. 'I'll see what I can do with these,' he mumbled under his breath, and was gone from the poky, dark, wooden room almost as soon as he'd got back to his feet.

Romana left a few short seconds, enough for J to walk comfortably out of earshot, before turning to face the Doctor. 'You're too hard on him, really,' she said.

The Doctor harrumphed. *' Well,'* he said, at length, shaking his head in exasperation. 'I just thought it was sensible to get this problem of his sorted out sooner rather than later since we've probably got more important things on our minds, like getting back into normal space for instance...'

`What do you make of that?' Romana was saying, ignoring his jibe, and pointing to the space behind the Doctor from which they'd removed the planks and the cassettes.

The Doctor squinted at it through the gloom.The alcove stretched back a few feet and there was clearly a large hole at the back of it, through which they could see the next (aluminium-walled) room. The next room was significantly better lit than this one, so a dim shaft of light shone through the cavity.

The Doctor shrugged. Going over to the hole, he saw that the wooden planks had been hiding a shoddy join of three parts of the wall, which betrayed the fact that it had been put together in the same fashion as much of the Structure - piecemeal and, perhaps, not particularly well.

Unable to resist, the Doctor started to pull away first one piece, then another, until eventually the whole wall had collapsed. The effect was instant, as the joined part-wood, part-aluminium room was much bigger, and much lighter, than most of the rooms they'd had to inhabit for the past few days.

`How very interesting,' the Doctor mused - and, by now supremely indifferent to Romana's presence or otherwise, he set about investigating the other walls of the room.

With Adric's help, by mid-afternoon the Doctor had torn down over four dozen walls, effectively dismantling large parts of the Structure with no discernible ill-effect. On the face of it someone had simply

been erecting temporary or prefabricated walls, apparently for the sake of it, in almost every room in the tower, in some cases sub-dividing a vast chamber into four or five much smaller, much less inviting rooms. The dismantling 206

process was cathartic and exhilarating as well as fascinating, and the Doctor was cheered to find that J was not the slightest bit perturbed.

Indeed, quite naturally, he seemed pleased to find that the Doctor - in perhaps the simplest, yet least expected manner possible - had begun to lift the plague of darkness that had blighted the Structure for so long.

Struck with a new-found eagerness to break down barriers and let in light, the Doctor's next step was to ask Romana if she'd like to explore outside.

It was dusk, or dawn, outside - one sun was very low in the sky, the other almost completely out of view - but the contrast with the Structure's cloying darkness was profound. Romana's first thought, following the Doctor through an exit they'd discovered together in an abandoned kitchen, was that the gardens were absolutely beautiful: the one into which they emerged was thriving with rich, exotic flowers in shades of mauve, bright red and plum, and infused with a scent not unlike lavender.

Further out, there were countless enclosures of similarly lavish displays whose beauty, even in twilight, was simply staggering.

Her second thought, which the Doctor managed to vocalise just as she formed it, was confusion: this wasn't what they'd both seen through J's bizarre virtual-reality set-up inside; not even remotely. That had been overgrown, uncared for, largely dead; this was the opposite.As the Doctor put it: 'Not really the place we've been led to expect, is it?'

They walked a little further, following a pristine stone path through the mauve-and-red garden and into a second enclosure, mainly cultivating what looked to Romana like tulips.

Ì don't know what to make of it,' Romana said. `Do you think J knows what it's really like out here?'

The Doctor just shrugged. He was peering and poking at the plants, the paths, and the little wooden fences that separated the flowerbeds, as if pleased to be encountering a new twist to their predicament. Though intrigued, Romana found it hard to think past the sheer

pleasure of walking in sunlight, breathing in fresh air and the scent of flowers. Rather belatedly, she remembered the fact that unless J was entirely mistaken -

or, implausibly, she thought, unless he'd lied to them from the first - the gardens were also populated by monsters. She looked back at the tall, imposing form of the Structure as they escaped its shadow, its old walls grimy grey and featureless.

`Perhaps we should be careful,' she hissed to the Doctor, wondering if J's creatures might have already heard them talking.

Òh, *piffle;* the Doctor almost shouted, as he knelt down to examine a flowerbed. But his voice was lower as he turned back to Romana, pointing out a small patch of the flowerbed that was entirely bare and charred. 'He was right about the fires, mind you,' he murmured.

`Look at these tracks, though,' Romana found herself saying: the path near the flowerbed had tiny parallel tyre-marks, leading up to an area of the fence that had been knocked down:Presumably this is where one of J's machines has been driving around. If it had a fault, the fire could just as easily have been caused by that:

The Doctor nodded and stood up. He noisily clapped the soil from his hands.

They walked a little further, Romana looking out for the creatures they'd been warned about, the Doctor typically fearless. Eventually they sighted what seemed to be the edge of the fenced-off area J had told them was affected by the Encroachment, beyond which there seemed to be a large field, a road, a few hills - and in the distance, unmistakably, dozens of large buildings similar in appearance to J's Structure. Romana judged that most were smaller in height, though perhaps covered larger surfaces.

Crucially, the buildings all appeared to have windows, many of which showed lights switched on inside So there *were* other people here...

She hurried after the Doctor as he strode purposefully into another enclosure. As soon as she could, she decided, she was going to have a conversation with J.

`But why not come outside and see for yourself?' Romana was saying.

They were sitting together in the observations room, Romana leaning forward in the systems administrator's uncomfortable plastic-moulded chair, J perched awkwardly on a low bench. They were huddled in one corner of the room, largely because in the midst of the Doctor's exploits at tearing down numerous walls in the Structure, he'd also discovered a large portion of the observation room's floor that came away, and accidentally removed it. The exact-square aperture in the middle of the room now afforded a view down to several of the Structure's lower floors, through a complex network of missing walls, ceilings and floors. At one point, they'd even spied the Doctor three or four floors below, apparently ready to break down another wall.

J's body language, never particularly indicative of confidence, had been stiff and withdrawn since Romana had first started talking, more so when she'd started to ask about the surprisingly good state of the gardens. So far, it had transpired that a glitch in the remote-control software for the roving machine meant that the virtual-reality display didn't always show the correct picture, which frankly Romana could have worked out for herself Furthermore, J seemed to accept that there were other people outside and looking after 'his' gardens, though he swore that they too were banned from the fenced-off area infested with the Encroachment.

Ìt isn't safe: was all J would say - a **familiar** excuse for his obvious reluctance to leave the Structure.

`Because of the creatures?' Romana prompted.

`Partly... '

Partly.Well the Doctor and I did discover something out there that was threatening the plant life, and the solution you've been using works perfectly well on that' She was trying not to sound too impatient, but it was difficult. 'It's hardly a plague of monsters though, J: perhaps your software gets that little detail wrong, as well:

The administrator looked up, but it was impossible to tell whether he was genuinely surprised or intrigued, or guilty at having been found out: that dratted visor of his, almost black, hid any trace of emotion in his eyes.

'I know they're not...' he started to say, but Romana interrupted.

Ìnsects: She paused for a second to let the word sink in. "That's what we've been afraid of these last few days, the reason why we've been cooped up in here in the dark. They may be a threat to your gardens,

I'll accept, but that's it - they're nothing more than' - she searched for a word

- 'than greenfly'

J shuffled uncomfortably 'I know they're not as bad as they seem from the simulation,' he said at length. 'But - insects?' He seemed genuinely baffled. I'm sorry.' He put his head in his hands.

Romana tried a different tack. The Doctor and I have been out half the morning, through every part of the gardens. We've even tested the creatures in the TARDIS lab, for any possible health risks.They're harmless to people, to all animal life; they only kill plants. We've taken the acidic solution from the machine and sprayed it wherever there are signs of it in the gardens. It'll be gone within days:

Ì hadn't realised you were out there...'

Ì came inside when I'd had enough.The Doctor's got Adric working on it now.'

She was pleased when he returned her smile.

`So you see: it's safe; she said.

He shook his head:I don't think I can do it:

Romana stared at him:But why not?'

Ì've been in here for a year,' he said eventually 'I don't think I can be anywhere else.The air, the light' - he indicated the visor - 'would be too much; my eyes can't even adjust to the lighter rooms in here. The Structure is all I know now I've acclimatised.'

She shook her head. "That doesn't make any sense,' she said, not unkindly. 'Your eyes are bound to have adjusted to the dark in here, a little, but they can adjust again:

The days are crazy out there, you know. There are two suns: Romana smiled. 'I know; she said *It's your planet,* she thought about saying, but then didn't. 'Why not take off the visor first, start adjusting slowly before you go out?'

J's hand went to his face, an involuntary motion, as if he wanted to hide away. 'I'm not sure,' he said. 'I know all this' - he waved a hand

beneath him at the hole in the floor, towards the Structure's lower floors - 'isn't right; I know the darkness isn't right; I know the walls aren't right. It's just that it's my darkness, and my walls. They're sort of precious to me. And I'm... well; I'm scared.

Romana got up from the chair, and took the visor off before J could know what she was doing.

He gave an involuntary yelp at first, screwed his eyes up for several seconds, covered his face with his hands. But eventually, carefully, and as if he were in pain, he let his hands fall to his lap, and looked at Romana.

His eyes were the saddest, the oldest and the most tired that Romana had ever seen. But for a split second, as she took his hand and asked him again to come with her outside, they seemed to sparkle.

It was a few more days before the Doctor, Romana and Adric left the Structure, during which time they were good enough to help eradicate most of what remained of the Fncroachment.The Doctor had been candid that there were probably some plants that were still infected, and that the insects could begin to spread again if the gardens were not regularly inspected. But J knew now how to deal with them if they came back, and more importantly, he knew not to fear them as much as he had.

For his part, J had tried to share as much as he could with the Doctor and Romana about the relative positions of the planets and the stars, in the hope that it would help them find their way out of what they called È-Space'. They'd smiled politely and taken down all the information in a notebook, but he honestly wasn't convinced that he'd managed to help them at all. What they meant by 'normal space' was something of a mystery to J, frankly, and he'd taken their advice not to worry about it unduly. This was his universe, and he didn't need to know about any others: he had enough of a challenge on his hands just trying to live in the one he'd got. Still, as they'd said their goodbyes he'd wished them luck in finding their way home, and he'd meant it.They had helped him an awful lot.

In the weeks after they'd left, J had spent more and more time outside in the gardens - increasingly, he found he was able to cope with the light, and the open space - and had even made contact with a few of the people from elsewhere in the town. It was a hard process, and there were whole days when he wanted nothing more than to stay inside the Structure, retreating to the darkest room he could find.

On other days,.-he would find parts of the Structure that even the Doctor hadn't managed to uncover. There were still walls that could be moved, pathways that could be opened up, and floors that could be taken out. At least twice a week, he liked to come up here to the observation 210

room, and look down at the changing, ever-more-illuminated complex.

He'd even been able to find some windows, and on good days, he opened the shutters.

It had been J, in fact, who had urged the Doctor and Romana to go eventually: they would have stayed longer, he thought, perhaps until the darkness had fully lifted. But there was no way of telling how long that would take, or when they could say the task was done: he preferred to think that he should take up the reins of continuing the process just as soon as he could, and so eventually, he had persuaded them to go.

When he came to the observation room, increasingly, liked to sit in the alcove that had once been occupied by the TARDIS - the impression of its panelled doors left indelibly in the dusty clay. He had the feeling there might be something indulgent about it, and he knew in his heart that the Doctor, his friends, and his ship were not likely to return. But, on good days and bad, he was comforted by the knowledge that they had been there, that they had helped him, and that they had left their mark.

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Greenaway

Peter Anghelides

I've always liked this room. I think it's the way the orange light of early morning falls across the carpet as it spills in from the eastern picture window, and then slowly changes to golden yellow as the sun comes round to the bay window by midday. Dual aspect, that's what a house vendor would call it, isn't it? I've tried to remember the first time I saw it, but do you know I honestly can't recall.

Never mind, let me stand here in the bay for a while and look out over the park. I have a curious itch above my left knee, and it's making my whole leg tremble. But I don't think I'll scratch it just now.The whole sky is beautifully clear, not a cloud to be seen, not even the high cirrus that sometimes smudges the brilliant blue. The day is hot and

still, and it's going to stay fine until sunset.

Through the open louvres I can hear the chatter of small children as they spin on the merry-go-round and build castles in the sandpit. They're not close enough to talk to, though perhaps a shout would carry across to them in the still morning air. I shan't try; it would only alarm them.They're so full of life, but just out of reach. And besides, here's the hum of their older siblings as they round the corner on their hoverboards, and cast long shadows that dance with impossibly long limbs over the sidewalk. I wince as, for a moment, a red-haired girl threatens to crash into one of her friends, but when I open my eyes again I can't see either of them any more. Even their shadows are gone. I wonder why the redhead never seems to get older.

My doctor's come to visit again today. I don't remember letting him in, but there he is on my best sofa. I can't help but smile, he seems so lost between its huge, plump cushions; he looks just like a pile of washing. It must be the big handkerchief sticking out of his jacket pocket that gives that impression, or the fact that everything about him is dishevelled -

from his creased check trousers to his rumpled face. Even his bowtie is askew

`Would you like to go outside?' His voice is breathless, though he's been sitting there since... no, I'm not sure I can remember. 'It is a magnificent day, Greenaway. We could step out into the park'

`No thank you!I reply. I've noticed a china service on the sideboard. 'I've just made myself some tea. Perhaps you'd like to join me?' There is a pile of sandwiches, neat triangles on a willow pattern plate, and a cake stand with garibaldi biscuits on the top and slices of frosted sponge below.

`When did you make that?'The doctor stands beside me now. I can't see his medical bag. Maybe he's not a medical doctor.

`Did the housekeeper make it for us? Have you seen her? Or my daughter, perhaps'

Ah yes,' says the doctor. He's pleased, because he's clasped his hands together and is bobbing up and down on his heels like an eager child.

`Your daughter, very good, Greenaway. Come along, come along, she's

in the park. Let's go and see what she's doing, shall we?'

Àfter we've had our tea.These sandwiches are very *nice'*

He stamps his foot. It's as though he wants to seize me by the arm and haul me down the stairs. Are there stairs to the street? I wish I could picture it in my mind.

`Look, she's waiting outside for you.' He's pointing.

But when I glance towards the window, the sun is dazzling; my eyes are watering. Ì can't see her.'

Òh, you're not looking'

It's too bright' After a struggle, I manage to shut the tall louvres. The vertical slats throw stripes of sunlight across the room. I smile at my doctor's frowning face. 'You look Like an unhappy prisoner staring between the bars; I tell him.

`Not me, Greenaway,' he responds mournfully. He flops down in a heap on the sofa once more. `Do you remember my last visit? We talked then about your agoraphobia'

Ì don't think so'

Do think, please, Greenaway. We reminisced about the times we'd hiked over the coastal paths together, and pitched a tent on the grassy plateau by the cliffs before the storm set in. Martika was with us then:

`Martika:

`Yes, your daughter, Martika. When I spoke to you last, we agreed that you'd see her again soon'

`No. No, that wasn't you. It was a different man'

It was me,' he insists.

`He was older. White hair:

`Greenaway...

`More tea, I think.Yes, more tea.' My eyes have adjusted to the low light now, and I can make my way to the oak sideboard to pour another cup.

Next to the service is a tidy pile of cowrie shells. Behind me, I can hear my doctor, he is hopping from foot to foot in agitation. I wonder if he's going to push me towards the door, or claw at my clothes and drag me aside. 'Are you going to examine me, doctor? You haven't touched me since you've been here'

`Why, are you in any pain?'

`No, I just have this odd itch in my left leg,' I say. 'Or is it my right leg?'

`Have you scratched it?'

Ì can't. Or rather, I don't want to.' I notice that there is no more tea in the pot. 'Is it time for you to leave?'

He's smiling a sad smile, the sympathetic type that doctors give you when they've done all they can. 'I believe so. I will come and see you again. I may do that, mayn't I?'

On the sideboard there is a fresh tea service - one tall beaker next to a little brown pot, with steam rising from the spout. The cowrie shells are now in a straggling line, as though cast there by the tide. While I'm pouring myself a fresh mug, I notice that the louvres are open again.The doctor is stood in the park below, and stares up at my window. The red-haired girl is beside him, waving and calling, but I can't catch the words; she's just out of reach.

The sky is clouding over. The doctor and the redhead have already disappeared before the first fat drops of rain explode on the dusty pavement.

I hear my doctor's voice before I see him. I don't notice that he's already let himself in. I stand by my picture window, gazing out into the late afternoon sunlight. I can just make out the children's playground, far away across a wasteland of scrub grass. The children are tiny figurines in the distance.A little red-haired girl gesticulates excitedly, too far away to hear.

Is she beckoning or just waving? But the doctor's talking now, and when I check again the child has melted away.

I tell him: 'I'm sorry, what was that?'

He's pinching the bridge of his nose, a theatrical gesture of impatience.

`Have you heard a word I've been saying, Greenaway?'

`Stay calm, I tell him. 'Would you like some tea?' He looks more like a medic than my previous doctors - whites, or near enough.

No tea, thank you. I'm in something of a hurry, as it happens. I wanted to tell you that Martika is leaving today. It's your last chance to see het Are you packed and ready to go?' He gestures towards the front door.

I peer past him, down the steps to the street. 'It seems rather bright today, don't you think? I must find my sun shades. And a Panama, yes. I think I'd suit that as well as you do.' There's a tight band of pressure around my head, as though I'm already wearing a sunhat that is half a size too small. Another of my headaches.

`You have to leave now I can't wait for you, I'm sorry.'

I frown:You waited for me before'

His cheerful face clouds over like a sudden squall:We must leave now.

Please' With this he turns smartly and trots down the steps, an impatient batsman dashing from the pavilion to the crease.

`Doctor?' He's left the door ajar, though I can't see where he's gone.The 215

sky lowers, auguring rain. So I push the door to.After the latch has clicked firmly into place, I draw the heavy curtain over the doorway, and I hang my Panama back on the hat stand.

`You do remember the rock pools, Greenaway?'

I'm thinking about whether to ignore him or not. My doctor's voice gently fills the upstairs room. After he asks me a third time, I stare up at him. From where I'm sat at my study desk, I must raise my head to see him. His head and shoulders are a portrait silhouette, stark against the small bright square of window high on the far wall, his long, dark hair curled in the light like wispy tentacles.

`We stumbled across the rock pools,' he insists. After we clambered over those huge, smooth rocks that surrounded the beach. You

remember!

When we saw the crabs scuttling towards us for safety, that's when we knew:

Ì don't recall,' I reply, and turn away. I roll the cowrie shells to and fro over the leather writing-surface of my desk.

`You do recall.You *must* recall! Come on, come on!'

'No' My legs are itching again. I ponder whether to massage them. I cannot see them below the desk, but my doctor cannot see them either behind the modesty board.

Ì'm sorry, but I need you to remember the beach. That's where the accident happened: He interrupts my game by placing his palms flat over the shells. His fingers almost, but not quite, touch mine. 'I wonder if I should ever have taken you there, Greenaway. And yet, we were able to stop the incursion!

Ì'm tired' I look across the room at my lonely single bed. The sea-green coverlet is drawn back, and I suddenly long to lie down and pull it over me.

`Let's talk about the accident, insists the doctor. 'We've avoided that for too long. We confronted the invader in the bay, beyond the beach. You helped me save the village, drove the creature back, but at great cost to yourself. Remember!'

I want to move across to the bed, but my legs are too tired. His soft, insistent voice purrs in my mind. Ì shouldn't have involved you. But I was younger and more foolish then, though I thought at the time I was older and wiser. And I certainly wasn't physically strong enough to hold the invader alone. You and Steven did that. And now, you need to visit that place again. Come there with me, and you can be alive again: We're standing by the window, now, and he shows me the view.A jade expanse of sea stretches to the horizon beneath a grey sky. The beach must be far below us. 'Listen; whispers the doctor. 'You can hear the hissing sound of the surf on the shingle bar.We're moving across it; there's purpose in our movement. There are ridges of sand under our feet as we 216

skirt the rock pools; we can feel bladder wrack squelching under foot.

Take a breath, now: that's the scent of salt water and old seaweed surrounding us'

I close my eyes, and it's as though the memory is sliding into view. But no, no, I can sense the creature. It's crept up from the ocean floor while we are unawares; our trap isn't ready. It's seized me in its waiting claws.

The tide fizzes white around me as the creature thrashes about, drags me back into the freezing water And its dreadful jaws...

My eyes snap open. The daylight is dazzling. No!'

`*Yes,* Greenaway. We have to go further, together. We have to remember together.' I can't see the doctor any more, he's murmuring into my ear from behind me.`Let's start again. We're by the stile at the top of the cliffs.

The breeze is fresh on our faces. Beyond us is the path that leads down to the beach...'

`No' I am calm now, I have decided. My doctor's face crumples in disappointment. 'You medics, I tell him, 'you seem to be getting younger all the time'

`You never quite know what you're going to get:

Ì recall a previous doctor saying that. I think one of them had a jacket like yours. Blue velvet. Shorter, though. Fancy shirt: He obviously wants to interrupt me again, so I say: 'Is Martika here?'

His hair writhes as he shakes his head. `Martika isn't here any more. But then, neither am I:

`You're making a lot of noise for a ghost'

He smiles sadly. 'I must be making some impression, then.This is merely a telepathic conversation'

Àre you a medic? Or are you a psychiatrist?'

I sense that he's humouring me with his sad smile. 'I'm not sure any more.You're getting harder to reach, Greenaway. I'm losing you'

I grin right back at him.'Well, I'm still here.And I'm not going anywhere, you know:

He doesn't seem especially amused by this. 'Truer than you know, old friend'

After he's left, I lie on my bed and listen to the sounds that filter through the high window. From far away comes the slowly dragging roar of mighty rollers mounting and crashing onto the defenceless beach.

If I raise my head slightly from the pillow, I can see over the blanket to the far side of the room. My new doctor is sitting on the desk. Even though he's swamped in his big afghan coat, I can tell he's in the lotus position.

He remains perfectly still for several minutes. Finally, he flicks his finger cymbals together, and the chime seems to fill the whole bedroom. A decision has been reached.

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He opens his eyes and stretches hugely:I don't think you will ever leave here, old friend.'

Ì don't want to, I remonstrate. 'I just have a headache. Otherwise, I'm very comfortable here:

That's very much my point.'

From my bed, I can follow his progress around the room. He encompasses the whole area with a gesture. I can smell his cologne now; the heavy fragrance of patchouli oil. 'Greenaway, these days you mostly sleep.You barely move, you don't eat - '

Ì'm not hungry'

- and you don't drink.You are cocooned in your private world; you are utterly removed from the outside. Haven't you worked it out yet, Greenaway?'

Ì'm safe:

`You're dying.

My doctor is not a tall man, but he looms over me in my bed. There is little illumination in the room, only a weak and naked bulb supplemented by what little sunlight slants in through the ventilation grill on the far wall.

`Dying? I don't feel like I'm dying. I just have a headache: He sits on the bed. I wonder why I can't feel his body pressed against my

legs.And then he tells me.

`You barely survived the attack on the beach, all those years ago.

Between us, we did enough to hold back the intruder until our reinforcements arrived. You were terribly injured - physically and mentally.They could not save your legs.They replaced a third of your skull with metal. You're not suffering from a headache, Greenaway. You're trapped in the reconstructed shell of your own body:

Ì feel sleepy' I protest.

`You never awoke.'

I don't want to listen to any more:Let's talk about this again another time'

`There can't be another time, my dear old friend:

The scent of patchouli is stronger now, though the doctor's voice is growing fainter. I peer at him reluctantly. His hair is ginger, that seems familiar. He's talking again: 'Your mind doesn't want to control your wasted body, and the machinery keeping you alive can no longer do so.

Today, I'm visiting you to say goodbye.And to tell you that I'm sorry: He shuffles reluctantly to the door, and leaves. Just before he pulls the door closed behind him, he flicks off the light.

The feeble light from the ventilator grill falters and dies. My eyes are wide, but soon I can see nothing. Ocean sounds speak softly from afar, rising in volume, hissing all about me. The sea rises up to my waist, my 218

chest, my face; and then I am slowly hauled back, into a water-world of waving weed and waiting claws.

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I'm starting to get used to this room. The light is flat and even, but I suppose that's to be expected in a hospital. They don't like me describing it as a hospital, of course. 'It's a recovery facility,' says Doctor Cairns. She makes it sound like a recycling plant, somewhere that you take unwanted rubbish and remake it into something new.

They've remade me, I suppose.

Anyway, Doctor Cairns (`Call me Louise') thinks it's good for me to look out of the bay window of my hospital room. I've tried to remember what it was like when I was first brought here, but do you know I honestly can't recall.

Never mind; I can sit here in the bay for as long as I want and look out over the park. I have to stare through my own reflection, beyond the hollow pits of my eyes, past the shining plate in my skull. I can see there's a clear sky today, not a cloud to be seen. It's going to stay *fine* until sunset.

In the park, the school children are running around.

Nurse Jitalee has come in now I hardly noticed him; I was lost in thought while I gazed out of the window. He asks: Would you like me to wheel you outside for a while? It's a magnificent day.'

I can hardly summon the energy to shake my head. I gesture feebly at the tray in front of me with my stronger hand.There's a mug with a straw in it; steam rises in little curling clouds. I think I'll just sit here for a while longer,' I tell the nurse.The vocoder helps make my voice audible. Perhaps after I've had my tea.'

I have a phantom itch above my missing left knee, and it's making my upper leg tremble. Doctor Call-me-Louise says that this will subside when my mind comes to terms with the amputations. That's not going to happen, I suppose, while I stare out at the children and wish I was out there with them, running, dodging. They're only a few hundred metres away, but they may as well be on a different planet.

Like Martika. She's on a deep-space mission, Nurse Jitalee told me. She made a choice about her own life, unable to wait for me any longer. She's one year into a colony supply journey to Ptoronia, and won't be back for seven years. Won't be out of stasis for another two. I wonder whether the lack of exercise will mean her body atrophies, like mine has. My muscles are still too weak, so the hospital chair holds my scrawny remains upright.

They've given me a picture of Martika, a cheap print that she never expected me to see. It's a constant reminder of what she looked like just before she departed. It's sitting on my windowsill, washed out by the sunlight. She looks older than I remember her, of course, from before my accident. I suppose she isn't growing older at the moment, in stasis. My memory of her is fading like the picture.

Dr Call-me-Louise explained what finally shocked me into a recovery.

She told me that the Doctor has been visiting me, on and off, for more
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than fifteen years. On the last occasion, he switched off my life-support system without telling the medics. Half an hour after he'd left, they found me - implausibly still alive, surfacing from the coma, scrabbling up towards consciousness and clutching at existence. Fighting the backwash, striking hard for the shore, wriggling free of the writhing tentacles that were holding me down. Making my own life choice.

If the medics had been here at the time, they would have stopped him unplugging me. They'd have intervened, saved me, kept me in my dream world. I wonder if the Doctor knows that I'm awake, that I've finally surfaced. Or whether he'll come back.

I can still smell patchouli. It lingers on, fainter now, like a waning memory

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Eternity

Jonathan Blum

In the end Sarah Jane had to stomp on the trailing end of his scarf to bring him to a halt. Ever since he'd set the TARDIS in motion, the Doctor had been pacing headlong down these corridors, hands in his pockets -

slouching off with only a vague idea where Bethlehem was, but knowing that as long as he kept moving he'd make good time.

'0i: she repeated:I asked you a question.'

Even from behind she could picture his eyes widening in surprise. Did you?'

Àbout three left turns ago: Gathering up the scarf like a leash, she worked her way up to the front of him, keeping him from bolting off:Just one simple question. How long till we get there?'

`To Geshtinanna?'

"That's the one.'

He turned away. 'I thought you said it was a simple question: Òh,

come on' She plopped the load of scarf into his hands:What's so hard about that?'

`Well it all depends, doesn't it?' He started down the corridor again, strewing words in his wake as she kept pace. 'On where you're from, where you're going, where you started the journey relative to your native time-frame, where you're going relative to your native time-frame, what other time-travel events happened around either one of those end-points, what you did to the web of time just before you left...' He stopped abruptly, tilted his head and squinted, as if peering closely at a thought lodged inside his mind. And quite possibly on the weather. I should have paid more attention that day in *class'*

She grinned; she couldn't help it. With the Doctor, even if the explanation didn't make a lick of sense, it was still worth hearing him rattle it off. It was like having your own personal Lewis Carroll for any occasion. 'You mean, red skies at night, TARDIS's delight?'

Òh, not the weather: said the Doctor. The *whether:* And his eyes were on her, wide and sincere. 'Whether your destination exists. Or whether, while you're in transit, someone else has blundered about changing history so that it's not there any more.'

Sarah gave a wry frown:I can see that being a problem.'

`Not necessarily:And he set off again:You'd be surprised, the things that can still be around when they're not supposed to have happened any more...'

But she refused to be shaken off, matching him step for step. All I want to know is, should I look for the sunscreen now, or wait till Tuesday? I don't want a bus timetable, just a rough idea...'

Well, from a human frame of reference, as the crow ages, I'd say about...' He frowned in thought. Nine weeks?'

She crashed to a halt. He had the good grace to stop and watch her.

`Nine weeks!'

He shrugged with his face:If you say so'

Just halfway across the galaxy you said. Maybe fifty years in the future.

It didn't take us that long to go thirty thousand years - '

He rounded on her, a sudden burst of temper. 'Well I couldn't know, could I? All the temporal weather reports and maps of the currents in the vortex you could ask for, and you can still have the conditions change at the last moment. After you've locked in your course'

She stepped back, trying to get off whatever raw nerve she'd stepped on. Òh.

a silly question'

`Yes' And he grumbled his way down the white-roundelled hall. 'It would have gone much faster if we'd gone through M thirty-one in the fifty-seventh century, the vortex geometry's much less complex there.

Perhaps a week at most, if I'd known'

`Well can't you head there now?' He glanced witheringly down his nose at her. Ì suppose not'

Quieter now, he rounded another bend.These corridors seemed to have been laid out with an aversion to long straightaways or right-angle turns

- all the better to suit the sort of ramble he was on right now 'The time vortex never stands still; I mean they'd hardly call it a vortex if it wasn't moving, would they, and anyway if it was stable any Tom, Dick or Harry Sullivan could navigate through time without the benefit of a suitably advanced intellect, and that scarcely bears thinking about...'

Òh, *scarcely,'* she threw in.

So the upshot is, once you choose your course, your other choices at that moment are lost, just like they are in ordinary time' He paused for a moment to survey his direction. The slightest movement from where you start, and what was once a shortcut can become impossibly long' His voice had settled into a moody mutter, and for a moment she just watched him stride down the corridors, zig-zagging from one to the next, paying no attention to his choices because for once it no longer mattered.

`Nine weeks: she said again:I suppose it can't be that bad'

And he looked at her haughtily. `Yes.And you do have the most excellent company imaginable:

She stuck her tongue out at him and figured they were even.

The first few days were pleasant enough: a wandering rummage through 224

the rooms of the TARDIS, hundreds of years' worth of boxes to open and memories to jar loose. There were books to read, and more books to read to make sense of the first books, and note-pages flitting like butterflies from topic to topic, connecting the barely imaginable to the barely comprehensible. There were stories to write - notes to take on the next big thing back on Earth, trends to scoop, memories to put in order for the science-fiction novel she'd been thinking of writing. At night - or what passed for night in the ever-white vacu-formed corridors - there were mugs of hot cocoa and stories of Rasputin and Dharkhig, and the trouble the Doctor had had fishing the fire-gems out of the treewaters before their heat boiled the roots away. Occasionally he'd turn down the lights and lower his voice, and the walls would echo with a ghostly tale of lost souls in a stranded spacecraft, or the nameless horrors which lurked just behind the sofa waiting to devour little boys.

Gradually the corridors would dim of their own accord, and she'd return to her room.Though her room in the TARDIS was hardly *her* room, really. She'd stayed here for a few nights on and off, while in transit, but whenever they landed somewhere they inevitably ended up staying at a local hotel, or in a ditch, or the Grand Vizier's apartment - pulled by the Doctor's natural tendency towards the centre of things.The TARDIS, in the Doctor's eyes (and hers too, she supposed), was a place to get out of, like the daily hotel on a package tour of Europe. So her room on-board had always remained largely generic: a few singing stones from Khamaris on the writing-desk, a toy stuffed owl perched on one of the deep-set roundels in the walls.

And in the morning it was all still there: more stories, more storage, still more corridors to pace down with their uncountable roundels.

By about day forty-three, she was beginning to think of killing and eating him, just for something to do.

She tried bringing new finds into her room, from their daily wanderings, but no matter how extravagant or whimsical, they all too quickly became literally part of the furniture. It was then that she realised just what a horrible thing it was, to be *able* to expect the unexpected.

Because that had to be why the Doctor seemed so blase about all the contents of his time machine. Even when he took her to the meadow, buried deep in the TARDIS behind a thick iron-banded wooden door, while she gawped he just stood there irritably with his shepherd's crook, muttering about how he'd been meaning to get the sheep changed into butterflies for years now If the fun of all this for her was being able to get a glimpse of what unexpected things were lurking in his mind and past, what must it be like for him - none of this could surprise him. He already knew all the jokes he had to tell.

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Still, he certainly seemed to have something to fill his time with; even after she tucked herself in at night she often heard him pacing past her door. (He never seemed to sleep much. Perhaps he got pretty much all the shut-eye he needed from being knocked unconscious on a regular basis.) It seemed odd that he'd even have set the TARDIS up to *have* a night, if he was just going to stay up through it; when she asked, he said it was all keyed to her brainwaves, not just his. And anyway, she thought, the kind of walking he did was the kind best performed in twilight, or a prolonged artificial equivalent: endlessly circling, like a cat chasing its tail, trying to get a glimpse of the back of its own mind.

And the kicker to it all, she told herself on day forty-nine as she shuffled through a room full of memorabilia devoted to the Antarean Ploggs and their glortball pennant race from the year fifty-seven forty-nine, was that she hadn't been all that interested in going to Geshtinanna in the first place. Oh, it sounded vaguely interesting - plenty of sun and sand, the galactic equivalent of the Nile delta with about three times as much history behind it - but it struck her as the kind of place you could only spend a day or two before you'd be ready to chuck it in and go home.And now especially, the whole idea of using a time machine to go visit a *museum* of history, rather than the history itself, just seemed daft. Never mind getting an overview and a broad perspective, she'd got all the perspective on the passage of time she needed right here. History, she decided, was not having any control over where you were going, and taking forever to get there. History was a two-month-long journey in the back of her parents' car, kicking her heels and asking, *Are we there yet?*

She positively relished the day her watch stopped. It gave her something to talk to the Doctor about beyond anecdotes.And when he fished out his old pocket watch and it had stopped as well, it gave their explorations for the day an extra purpose.

`She does this sometimes,' he says, gesturing to take in the ship around them

'Why?'

He shrugged. 'Have you tried asking her? I'm sure she has a very good reason:

`Maybe she's trying to send us a message, she said. 'You know: "Stop watching the clock.."

`Perhaps, he shrugged. 'Or perhaps she just gets bored. It must get terribly tedious, you know, putting all those seconds in the correct order just for our benefit.A-ha...'

He opened a door into rich darkness: roundelled wood panels and brass rails, empty booths and tables and a thin carpet of dust across the bar.The 226

air thick with distant echoes of countless conversations.The hidden back corner of every village pub, carefully recreated in the depths of the TARDIS, left here all alone.

The Doctor led the way into the deserted pub, then trailed to a halt by the taps, peering at the wall-mounted clock: run down to nothing like all the others. Downcast again, he quoted in a sonorous voice. Tor there is nothing so morbid, so lonesome or drear... As to stand at the bar of the pub with no beer.' He upended one of the empties left abandoned on the bat 'Kipling:

She was still looking around, trying to take it all in. 'Who's all this for?'

He pursed his lips, as if the thought had never really crossed his mind. All my friends: he said quietly, and for a moment she felt her heartstrings twinge.

But already he was moving on - rummaging behind the bar for something light and fizzy. 'I'm sure she's done this before. It's just a precaution in case of heavy weather. When you're sailing on an ocean, the last thing you want is seawater sloshing about freely inside your ship, am I right? The same when you're sailing through time. Ahh... ' And he produced two bottles of lemonade, which he opened with a flourish.

`Maybe she's just tired of looking at you,' she muttered. He gave her a

funny look, and silently she called herself a tactless cow. "Minks you have a face that could stop a clock,' she explained, as brightly as she could.

AL' He finished pouring her bottle, then leaned across the bar, looking puzzled. 'I've never worked out why your species says that,' he mused, almost shyly now 'Wouldn't you want the clocks to stop if it was something *beautiful,* rather than the opposite? That would give you an unlimited amount of time to appreciate it.'

She rested her head in her hands. She figured she should come up with something witty, but after seven weeks of banter she was all out. Not that it would bother him, though; he could go on like this forever.

Her eyes drifted past him to the exhausted clock on the wall. Maybe it wasn't the TARDIS doing that: maybe it was all coming straight from his moods, just like the night-time lighting, and the corridors rearranging themselves to give him as much room to pace as he wanted. Maybe he wanted time to stop in here, to free him for an unknown while from all his worries about the outside universe. But he couldn't really be freed from it so long as there was another person in here, prodding and pestering him and generally marking each moment as it passes. He could stop all the clocks he wanted, but other people kept bringing their time in here with them.

Unless he stopped them too...

With a sudden shiver she brought herself back to reality, to fmd the Doctor staring at her from inches away - vast blue-grey eyes fixed on her own. 'Hello?'

'Sorry' she mumbled:Away with the fairies:

`Didn't think we had any of those on board...'

She didn't answer. Pleasant chat turned to companionable silence, companionable silence to an uncomfortable one.They sat there finishing their drinks, Sarah's eyes on her fingernails, the Doctor's eyes on the door.

Around them she felt the place crowded with the ghosts of all the people she wished were here but weren't. All the space in the world in the TARDIS, and yet she still felt confined, by the lack of other people.

It just wasn't fair, that she could even *think* about being bored with the Doctor. When you're tired of the Doctor you're tired of life. Though right about now, she *was* feeling pretty tired of life. And come to think of it, being tired of the Doctor also meant being tired of feeling bewildered, terrified, and generally surplus to requirements. Not lately, though; it still didn't make sense, she should be relishing this prolonged stretch of crisis-free downtime. And not just because it was a break from the whole intergalactic-mystery-tour thing; perfectly ordinary people back on Earth would kill to have such an uninterrupted block of free time in their lives.

So how come she'd run out of ideas for what to do with it?

And how about you, Doctor? If you want the docks to stop, why are you so restless now? If you just want to be left to your own devices, why are you never settled when you've got the chance?

Across the table he was fidgeting, hand on chin, his mind wandering endlessly in every direction at once.And there was no way she could get in there if she tried. She sat and tried not to watch him - her drink running dry, the endless hum of the TARDIS ringing ever louder in her ears.

One off-white morning she padded into the new-old console room in her stocking feet. The Doctor was already standing over the wooden control desk, his hands frozen over the buttons. Unmoving, unblinking, the light from the scanner screen playing over him like a statue. Slowly, she walked up to stand beside him - wondering what meaning he was finding in the hurtling swirls of colour on the screen. He'd said the time vortex was an expression of the fundamental interactions at the heart of the universe, a face-to-face glimpse of the mathematics which held matter and energy in their sensible order. Somehow she'd never thought of maths as pale neon blue.

Ìt's beautiful: she said.

Ì was afraid of that,' he murmured.

Òf what?'

`Look: He pointed into the swirling clouds - ahead, astern, her eyes couldn't follow the perspective of which way they were moving. There was something there... though *something* might be too strong a word.

Just a hint of order moving through the maelstrom, swept along beside them.

A wake,' he muttered.

`Well I certainly am now:

A dismissive shake of his head. Not you. That:

She looked again, increasingly desperate for a bit of sense.All she could grasp were the vaguest hints: a suggestion of right angles, something squared-off in the swirl.There was something maddening about the way it slid off your eyes when you tried to pin it down.

Àll right, a wake,' she said, surprised to find her voice shaking. 'As in, made by a boat, or as in, after a funeral?'

'Both:And he turned to meet her eyes, and the look on his face made her want to hide under the covers.

`The trouble with the web of time,' he went on, his voice a ghost of its usual boom, 'is that you can get stuck in it'

`Like a fly?'

`Very like a fly.' He turned back to the scanner and went on, low and foreboding:There are equations which are impossible to solve in three or even four dimensions. Set one of those as your course through the vortex, and you'll end up caught in a fractal Zeno's Paradox. Descending further and further into the cracks between the dimensions, but never. Reaching.

Anywhere'

This isn't another ghost story, she realised. He's not doing this for effect, he's really seeing it, right outside.

And that thing's on one of those?'

He nodded gravely Ìt's what's left of a TARDIS.'

She couldn't help staring again. There was absolutely nothing there A nothing which left a wake. It had been ground away by the forces out there till everything had been stripped away - till the only trace left of it was that very stripped-down-ness.1'wo-plus-two-is-four, interacting with equations that shied away from simplicity. Something *bad* been there, but it had faded into intangibility like a half-forgotten idea.

`They're built out of first principles,' he said:And once they decay, that's all that's left'

And the crew?'

He gave a tiny shrug. 'Gone to dust. Gone beyond dust. Gone to electrons, quarks, gone to the component numbers that describe them.

Reduced to a rounding error.' He walked slowly around the console as he spoke, putting more distance between himself and her. In a black way he seemed to be savouring the words.

`But it's still going; she said. `Their TARDIS. It's gone but it hasn't stopped:

Òf course it hasn't, it's a TARDIS. It *is* movement. In the vortex you're 229

defined by your path through time. And they, whoever they were, picked a path that goes on forever. Just because you'd die before you counted to infinity doesn't mean the numbers don't keep going:

Like the *Flying Dutchman,* she thought. In fact, really like the *Flying Dutchman;* people didn't see that actual ghost ship itself anymore - all that remained was the name, the idea, endlessly circling in people's memories. Stripped even of any sign of its context, it sailed on.

And they were right alongside it.

Going in the same direction.

Ìt's awfully dose: she ventured, wondering if he could notice the sudden quiver in her voice.

He shook his head irritably. 'What does that mean, dose? One's next to two, but there's an infinite amount of space between them If you look close enough: He looked back at the ghost on the screen:It could be right next to you, it could be infinitely far away:

Like you, then, she thought. She couldn't believe he was missing the fear creeping over her, the way she needed him to give her a firm sense of perspective on it all: turn the ghost back into a ghost story.

But he kept fiddling with his scarf, counting the number of rows in a given stripe:There's an infinite number of paths between them and us.

An infinite number of them perfectly safe. Until you hit the one

combination that takes you nowhere:Another row of stitches slid through his fingers. Òr the one after that. Or the one after that.' Bit by bit the stripe vanished from view. 'An infinite number of paths that take you nowhere but eternity.'

He balled up the end of his scarf and flung it irritably over his shoulder.

In that motion she saw all her worst fears realised.

`You think you got it wrong: she said.

His eyes refused to meet hers.

Her heart stopped. He kept looking inward, barely seeing her. 'If I did, it's a mistake I made the moment I locked in the course, weeks ago:

`But what do we do?'

`There isn't anything to do:

`But there's got to be a way to - '

`There's no way even to know. Not until we get to the point where we intend to materialise.' Suddenly with a sharp turn he brushed it all aside, his voice ringingly casual. 'If we can do it, that means we got it right. If not... *pfbhh:*

`So we can't even settle it.'

Ìt *is* settled. One way or the other:And he went back to fiddling with the buttons on the wood-panelled console, as if laying out a game of solitaire.

`But... but, my... 'The words were clogging her throat, she couldn't get them out. `...Watch!'

`Watch what?'

`This!' She flapped herself free of her stopped wristwatch and flung it onto the console next to the shaving mirror. 'Maybe she - maybe the TARDIS was trying to warn us.About this... '

"there wouldn't be any *point* in warning us,' he said bluntly. 'Not with nothing we could do to change it - and she would know that.' And all

Sarah could do was stand there, paralysed by his words. 'She's part of the vortex. We're travelling inside the cold equations themselves. They would know there was nothing to do but wait till they're resolved.'

He turned, pocketed his hands, and sauntered towards the door. 'Jam and scones today, I think'

`We had that yesterday!' she snapped, but he was already trailing his scarf out the door.

Right then she hated him for it. It was just so wretchedly unfair for him to spring this on her before her morning cup of coffee.And then to just keep walking away like nothing was different... On the rare moments when she could catch up with him, he dismissed the subject so easily that it was clear he wasn't even thinking about it.And not because he had any *reason* not to think about it, either - he didn't know anything that could convince him he hadn't done it, he was just putting it out of his mind regardless. It was driving her out of what remained of her mind. He genuinely didn't feel forever weighing in on him.

Instead he was spending every minute he could in motion now, reduced to nothing but this unsettled pacing. Not afraid; confined, bored, closed off. Really, he was exactly the same as he'd always been, only more so - as long as she'd known him, whenever he was there, you'd always gotten the sense he was halfway to somewhere else.

But for herself, there was more nothing to do than ever. Her notes finally landed in a pile on the floor, no point in writing them if they might never be read. She tried throwing herself onto the bed and having a good old cry, but even that seemed false and forced; she wasn't even feeling proper despair, because there was still too much doubt. She couldn't even move on into mourning. Somehow the fact that it wasn't settled, that there was nothing she could do to settle it, was the worst of all.

Stop being useless, girl, she told herself. But useless was exactly what they both were. She couldn't even struggle pointlessly against it, there wasn't even anything to struggle against.

The thought closed in on her she couldn't rely on him She kept shaking her head violently to dislodge the idea. He'd always been the one to get things right when it counted - doing the unimaginable, making the downright impossible just look terribly clever. Sure, sometimes he made mistakes, but they were only little ones. Except

that *this* had been a little one...

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She'd always thought there was nothing the Doctor wasn't good at.And looking at him now - doing nothing, he *really* wasn't good at. He'd devoted himself so wholeheartedly to keeping himself busy that he wasn't doing anything at all.

So they settled into a strange distant dance: swerving round each other in the corridors, words pared down to shorthand, her silence on the subject shifting between plea and rebuke. The last of her sense of perspective falling through the cracks, disappearing into the infinite amount of space between one and two o'clock.

And each morning, the ghost TARDIS, keeping pace with them on the scanner screen. Till she stopped daring to look.

In the end it was the electric kettle that did it.After two months of samey days she was going spare for a proper cuppa - not one of the ones spat out by the food machine, all perfectly heated and flavoured, and as identical as the roundels on the walls. She wanted to make a cup of tea where the 'make' and the 'cup' were just as important as the lea' bit - that wonderful dawdling ritual of looping the teabag string round the end of her pencil and fishing it into the water, rather than using the pencil to scribble down more notes on whatever artide was giving her trouble at that moment. Being able to get the amount of teabag-to-water contact exactly right... and getting it wrong more often than not, but not worrying about it, 'cause it was enough to do it herself.

But in all the Doctor's travels round the universe, all the junk he'd found at rummage sales from Alpha Centauri to Zoromungula, had he ever thought to pick up a proper kettle? No. Not even a flipping Teasmade.

And then one day, as she bloody-mindedly fought her way through the boxes in a roundelled Victorian parlour - charwoman's scarf wrapped round her hair, wielding a featherduster to beat back the dust-bunnies -

in a pile on the sheet-covered sofa, at the bottom of a cardboard box marked 'More Things', there she found them: a box of Tetley's, and a pristine stainless-steel electric kettle straight from every escapist fantasy of a nineteen-fifties housewife.

In a frightening fit of glee she had raced out into the corridors, trailing the kettle's lead behind her already able to taste that first too-strong, too-weak, too-anything cup of the unexpected.

As if this incomprehensible piece of alien technology she was running through would come equipped with a British standard three-prong outlet *anywhere in* its corridors.

When the realisation finally sank in, after an hour and a half of fruitless searching, she hurled the kettle against the wall with a great ringing crash and stamped her foot. She didn't seem able to stop stamping, or shouting, 232

and that's when she thought she really should be worrying about herself.

But she'd have to stop shouting first.

She found him a mile away, somehow - still pacing, always pacing, muttering to himself in a language she no longer recognised. She had to run to keep up.

Ì just can't take it any more:

Ìt's only two more days...'

`Two more days till forever.'

'Oh, you'll love it on Geshtinanna: If anything he was picking up his pace, even as she stumbled. 'Sun, sand, the Great River Of Creation...'

Just shut up about it!' She heard her voice go shrill and just didn't care.

`How can you pretend like it's just going to happen? When we could be stuck in here forever without even a wretched - electric - kettle!' He didn't say a word. And I'll grow old and die without ever getting to talk to anyone **but** you ever again!' Still no answer. 'Not *even* you!' She found herself yanking on his sleeve, trying to get him even to look at her `Too busy being all cosmic even to give me the time of day? Not that we have one anymore...'

`You just told me to shut up,' he snapped.

Òh, yeah, that's so mature of you. Seven hundred and fifty years and that's the best you can do? If you're ever going to be a grown-up, why

can't it be now?'

She stopped. He didn't. By the time she realised, he had already disappeared round the next bend. She just stood there, gaping, too furious and shaken and just plain wrung-out to follow.

'Oh, there you go,' she cried after him. 'Off walking in eternity again.

Well eternity can just bloody well stand still for a minute, d'you hear me?

Do you?'

Somewhere around the bend she heard a door clunk open. Then nothing.

He'd left her behind.

She turned round, dazedly, the endless roundels in all directions blurring together.The tears were welling up now, her throat knotting, her voice calling out to anyone, to no one:Only reason you keep walking like that is 'cause you're afraid of what might hit you if you stopped!'

Just silence, stretching onward, with no end in sight.

Òh Sarah Jane...' he murmured.

And he was standing there, right behind her, handkerchief in his outstretched hand. Tall and gawky and his eyes deep and wide, looking straight at her with the faintest shadow of a seven-hundred-and-fifty-year-old smile.

She fell into the hug like it was the last one in the world. She blew her 233

nose and rested her head against him, close enough to feel that smile on his cheeks.

`Terribly sorry' he said quietly 'I had to go get a clean handkerchief.'

Finally, in the console room. Even now, there was nothing she could do -

just hold onto the ship's brass rail as the Doctor circled the console on the dais, and watch the waves of cold blue light sweep across him.

On the scanner the TARDIS-wraith marked their steps, leading them into eternity: its invisible knife-edges close enough to touch, farther than the farthest star.

`Fingers crossed, Sarah?'

She folded her arms, hugging herself 'Fingers, toes, arms, legs...'

He flashed her a distracted smile and busied himself with the buttons in front of him, as if the secret of eternal life was hidden in their lights.

So it all came down to this. Nine weeks of trying to forget all about sand and sunshine and history and people. Nine weeks of slowly being stripped down to the bone. It all came down to this one endless moment of nothing.

Just the one moment. Now His eyes, reflected in the shaving mirror on the console, tight and staring.The moment she understood what she saw in them. The desperate concentration, even when he knew there was no difference he could make. Even if the fatal mistake was far beyond his reach, two months in the past. What gnawed at him was the possibility of helplessness. Not afraid of failing, not afraid of forever, but terrified of not being able to do anything about it. For all his inhuman strength and distance, they were in the same boat after all.

She looked away. Her eyes found her watch, abandoned atop the wooden console.

And saw it tick.

And as the screen faded, she caught a last glimpse of the worn-down straight lines of the ghost TARDIS travelling ever onwards, as the Doctor raised his eyes in a final salute.

Outside was green, and leafy, and drenched with rain spattering down from the jungle canopy. About as far from Geshtinanna as they could get.

And the most beautiful place Sarah Jane Smith had ever seen.There wasn't anywhere she'd rather be than in the delightful chill outside the TARDIS, watching the rain bounce off its chipped wooden panels and gather on the brim of the Doctor's battered felt hat.

She squelched into the mud, feeling the rain wash over her, and

watched the Doctor beam as she laughed.

Fatally he raised his nose to taste the air. 'Smells like the Capistrani 234

system. A good half-sector away from Geshtinanna... still, we could get there in - '

She laughed again. 'Oh, who *cares?'*

And the smile spread. Good point'

They walked a few feet into the jungle, settled on a rock. Probably there was an adventure to be had here, somewhere, but they probably wouldn't go that far: On the positive side,' he went on, with the time winds in our favour, it'll probably only take a day or two to get back to Earth from here...'

'Oh, I'm in no hurry. I'll go anywhere, as long as it's somewhere'

À girl after my own hearts,' said the Doctor. Then she could see the thought hitting him, slowly soaking in like the rain on the tweed of his jacket. I think I know what the TARDIS stopping the clocks was about,' he said.

`So tell me:

And he raised his eyes to the horizon, beyond the horizon, looking into a distance beyond measuring.

`Sympathy?' he wondered.

Like a ship lowering its flags to half-mast, she thought. Travelling alongside the ghost-TARDIS, pacing the cosmos on its endless path, must have given their ship a taste of what it would mean to wander the same road forever. And in turn it had given her a little bit of understanding, of what it meant to be alongside someone whose journey would never end.

She looked at the Doctor:I know how she feels'

`You're taking this awfully well; he said.

`Well, shouldn't I?'

He waved his hand at their surroundings. 'But I got it wrong!'

She spent a moment, a long moment, just looking. Taking in the impossible police box in the middle of the jungle, miles and light years from anywhere - blue squares against wild green. Stuck in the centre of this strange and unimaginable world, a little piece that would forever be home.

'It's the right kind of wrong; she said.

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